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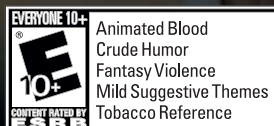
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Change is fun

Gamers like bullets, so it is with great pleasure that we have now injected our reviews with a bullet of our own: We call it "Parting Shot." The bare explanation behind Parting Shot is that you now have something to glance over when flipping through the reviews section. Yes, the traditional scoring system is still gone, replaced by this little icon and a spot of text that, after a lot of debate, is now the official Play way of officially stamping reviews.

I'll be the first to admit: it's a shock to the system to look at a review without that glaring score nailing down a certain finality to the process, but the Parting Shot fulfills that little extra something everyone still craves to walk away satisfied. Hopefully you'll agree, and at the very least, learn to embrace some much-needed change.

It's true, you know: change can be tough, and change can be rough. If you're Nintendo, you argue that change is very good—change in demographics, change in creative emphasis, change in all kinds of approaches to tapping the modern world of gaming. Nintendo might say that any pure gamer will agree, what *doesn't* change is the need for games to be fun.

The topic of what defines fun in a game has been coming up a lot this month, and thanks to the Wii, I've been armed with a great example in *Order Up*, a game about becoming a cook, managing a restaurant, and building your mini-

empire of happy customers. It's not hardcore, or heavy in daunting mechanics, or really that engaging in the way you might normally demand from a game. It might be branded as a "casual experience," but then what does that mean? If I had to look at it like I've been trained to look at games over the years, maybe I would find it hard to swallow as a "hardcore" gamer. But man is *Order Up* an atypical treat, apparently something I really needed to virtually toy with my love of food in between my other gaming sessions of killing people with bullets.

I've not finished my time with *Order Up*, or beaten it, or uncovered whatever it is I'm demanded to find before feeling good about my opinion, but to kick off a Parting Shot: "It's the first game I've played where I really want to re-evaluate what casual gaming means."

It's important, in any walk of life, to embrace the idea of change, and with that idea, next month comes a shifting emphasis on how we cover the industry and bring you varying degrees of perspective. As this multibillion dollar creature we call the games industry continues to evolve along with the people who love its crazy ways, it's going to take a lot more than a new review policy to boldly move along with it.

From the development side of the fence, newbies *Blue Omega* have taken a bold step by building *Damnation* more along the lines of a film, where a collection of outside

"Gamers like bullets, so it is with great pleasure that we have now injected our reviews with a bullet of our own..."

talents network together to support the central design team. I first got a taste of the project at GDC early this year, and was intrigued by the very early results of the process. Succeed or fail in the end, the core game and its visual style demonstrate a spirit that's worth sharing. Good title for a game too.

Till next month! **Brady Fiechter**

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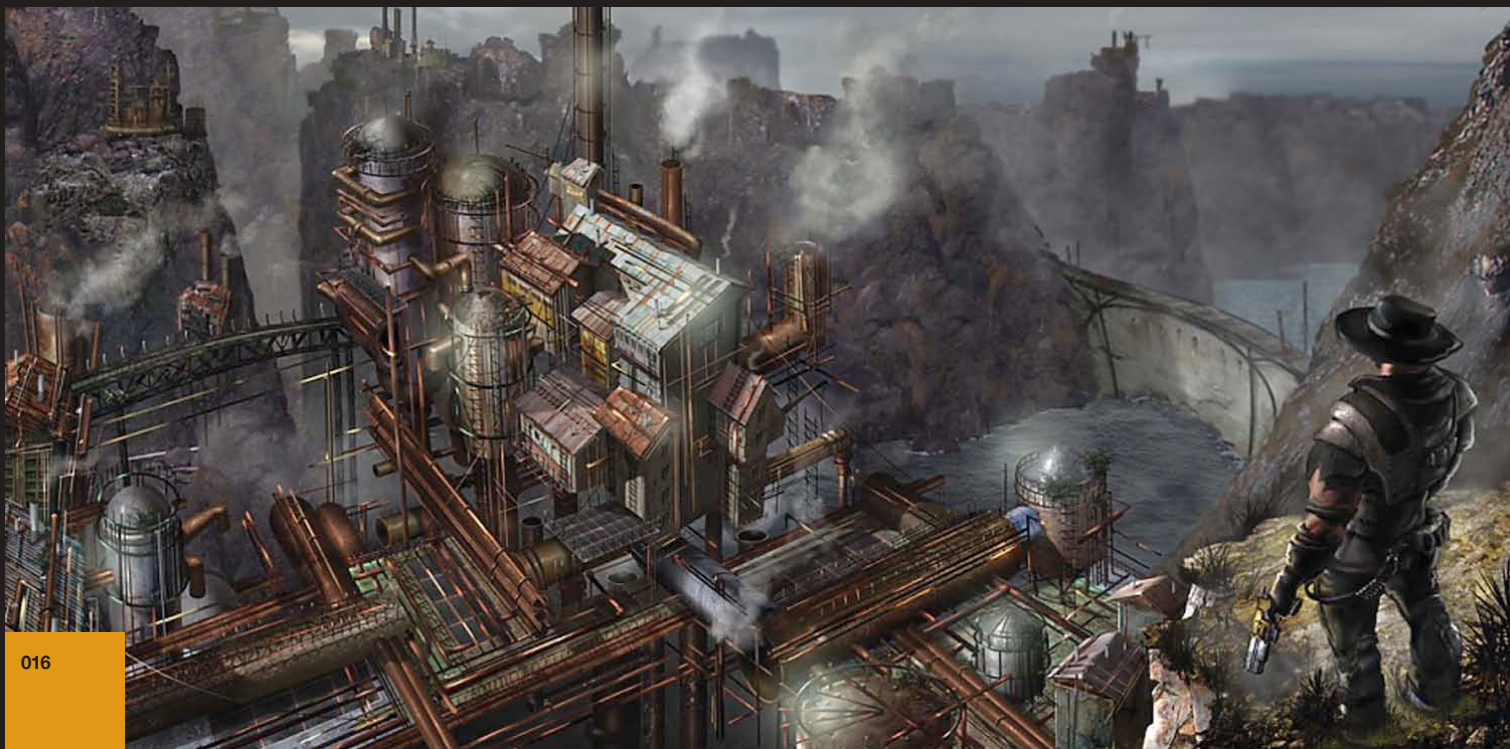
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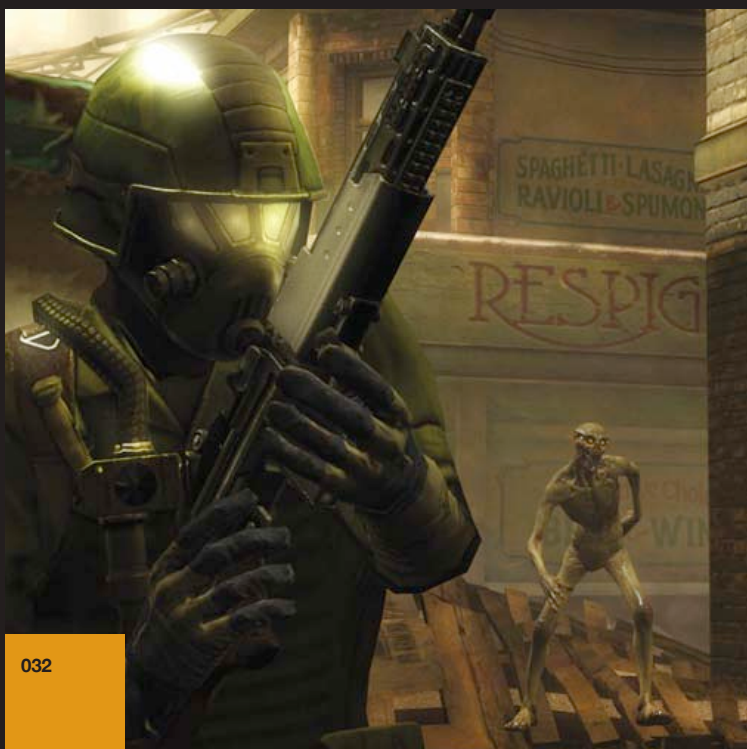
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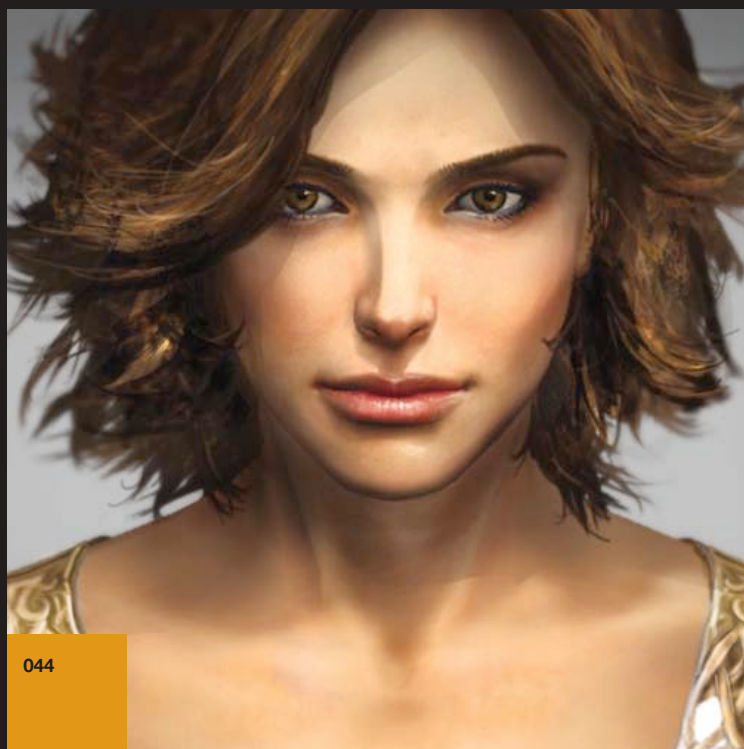
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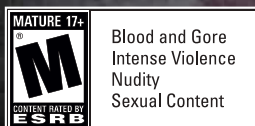
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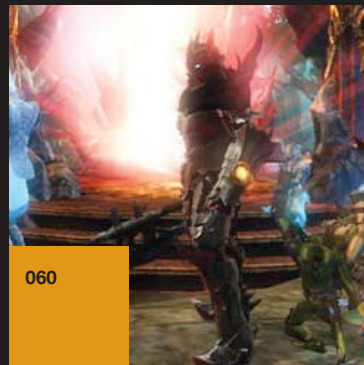


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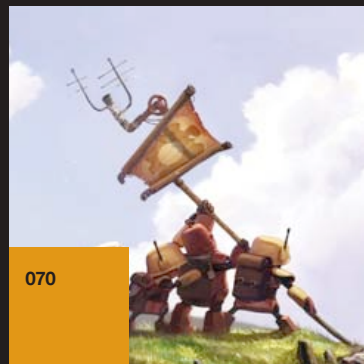
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► 2008 Year to Date: The Big Picture

Unluckily, video game consoles don't run on gasoline. Sales are way up across the board, and these are the lean months. The Xbox360 and PS3 continue to slug it out—check out the less-than 1000 unit separation for the month of April. Elsewhere the Wii and Nintendo first-party games continue to fly off shelves, although third-party software sales remain dismal relative to the size of the installed base.

Overall Market Comparison 2007-2008

	April 2007	April 2008
Video Games	839 Million	1.23 Billion
Video Games Hardware	339.2 Million	426.2 Million
Video Games Software	389.4 Million	654.7 Million
Video Games Accessories	110.4 Million	154 Million
	Year To Date 2007	Year To Date 2008
Video Games	4.18 Billion	5.47 Billion
Video Games Hardware	1.62 Billion	1.84 Billion
Video Games Software	1.97 Billion	2.88 Billion
Video Games Accessories	584.4 Billion	750.6 Billion

Hardware Sales - April 08

PlayStation 2	124.4k
PlayStation 3	187.1k
PSP	192.7k
Xbox 360	188.0k
Wii	714.2k
Nintendo DS	414.8k

Top 10 Videogame Titles April '08

01	GTA IV (360)	1.85mm
02	Mario Kart w/wheel (Wii)	1.12mm
03	GTA IV (PS3)	1.00mm
04	Wii Play	360k
05	Super Smash Bros. Brawl (Wii)	326k
06	Gran Turismo 5: Prologue	224k
07	Pokemon Mystery Dungeon: Explorers of Darkness (DS)	202k
08	Pokemon Mystery Dungeon: Explorers of Time (DS)	202k
09	Guitar Hero III (Wii)	152k
10	Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare (360)	141k



Gran Theft Auto IV



Mario Kart



Super Smash Bros. Brawl



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Guinness Book heralds GTA, guitar 'Heroes'...

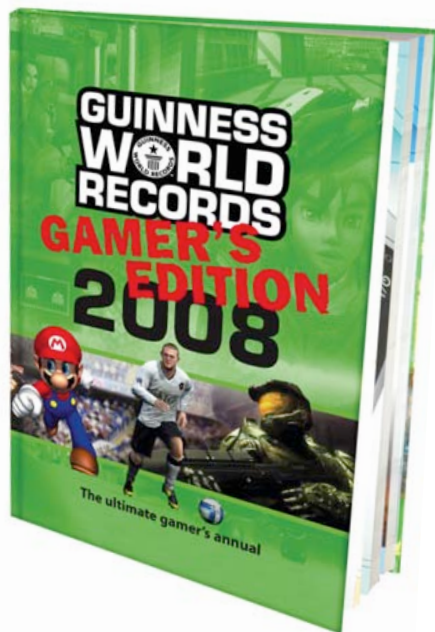
Who will be the first to croak playing Wii fit?

If anyone should find records fascinating, it should be a gamer. Check out the **Guinness World Records Gamer's Edition 2008** for a fun read. Check out <http://gamers.guinnessworldrecords.com>, and if you really get serious about the whole thing, you can post your own score you think break records. Here's one to beat: Rochester, Minnesota's Chris Chike apparently isn't too bad at Guitar Hero III, bagging "880,920 points (a 97% completion on Expert Level) for the song "Through the Fire and Flames" by DragonForce. Apparently this is the No 1. score to beat.

One of the more interesting numbers to recently come out pretty much confirms GTA is rather big. According to Guinness World Records, GTA is tops in the following:

First Full "Sandbox" Action-Adventure- GTA III
Biggest Selling Game of 2001- GTA III
Biggest Selling Game of 2002- GTA: Vice City
Best-selling Playstation 2 game of all time- GTA: Vice City
Best-selling PSP game of all time- GTA: Liberty City Stories
Largest in-game soundtrack- GTA: San Andreas
Largest Voice Cast in a video game- GTA: San Andreas
Most Guest Stars In A Video Game Series- Grand Theft Auto Franchise.

GTA is also "the biggest entertainment release of all time." \$310 million in one day, from 3.6 million copies sold. Definitely check out the Guinness site for more blurbs. It's entertaining stuff!



History of Capcom

Maybe it's the political climate, but this month, numbers of interest keep popping up, like Capcom's release of a long list of sale figures for the storied company's various releases throughout the years (game companies tend to be a little secretive when it comes to real numbers). As you'd expect, Resident Evil dominates with 34,500,000 sold. Here's a rundown on 14 titles Capcom broke down by genre:

Genre	Major Titles	Unit Sales
Shooting	1942 Series	1,200,000
	Ghosts 'n Goblins Series	4,300,000
Action	Commando Series	1,200,000
	Mega Man Series	28,000,000
	Disney Series	13,200,000
	Final Fight Series	3,200,000
	Onimusha Series	7,800,000
	Devil May Cry Series	9,500,000
	Monster Hunter Series	6,300,000
	Street Fighter Series	25,000,000
Fighting	Breath of Fire Series	3,000,000
RPG	Resident Evil Series	34,500,000
Adventure	Ace Attorney Series	2,800,000
	Dino Crisis Series	4,400,000

Street Fighter IV: Meet Rufus

With attacks such as, "Spectacle Romance", "Space Opera Symphony" and "Messiah Kick" you gotta' respect the new SF big man. Sorry Honda.



Pac-Man: The Movie. The end is nigh.

First things first. It looks like the Castlevania movie is happening, with Paul Anderson (Resident Evil) as writer and Sylvain White as director. There have been rumblings around this for a while, but now it's been given to the hands of Sky Pictures, Variety first reported. \$200 million has been scooped up to fund a few other films as well, the one most curious: Pac-Man. Why not. The character's an icon and could find a surreal magic with a modern-effects driven entertainment. Expect a follow-up on this next month.

Man stabbed passing the waiting line for GTA IV.

Lots going on this month in games, but nothing quite as pathetic as this crazy story: a guy was stabbed in London while passing the long line where people anxiously waited to buy their copy of GTA IV. Thankfully he's OK, and the worst that might come of this in the end is all the badmouthing the game will get for ostensibly corrupting society. Makes you wonder if society might be kind of corrupted already, and maybe the problems go a little deeper than GTA IV.



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HOW TO PLAY GTA 4 (360)

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playback

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Rant of the month

Regarding play abandoning a numbers-based scoring system, I applaud the size of your balls. A system of conveying a game's worth based on a 1-to-5 or 1-to-10 scoring system is a pile of crap that has gone on for as long as I can remember and should have been ditched years ago. Art is a completely subjective experience and, since video games are the highest form of art, the uselessness of such a system should be even more obvious. How does the Mona Lisa stack up against the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel? Well one is obviously a 4.8, the other a mere 4.2 (on a 5 point art-o-meter). Nevermind that they're not really that similar at all, I don't really f--ing care to hear a detailed explanation so I'll just trust in those cold, sterile numbers. And what about the scoring of people, too? What if you started dating a girl who was genuinely kind, had interesting hobbies, and could light a conversation on fire - how do you describe her to your other male friends when, maybe, she isn't a "perfect 10" in the hotness department? Would

anyone really be so stupid as to throw away such a relationship (which rates a sorry 6.2 on the chattel-o-meter) and chase after some tail that rates at least an 8, even if the 8-point lady herself is full of so much venom and self-hatred that you have to check yourself into the Guantanamo Bay Clinic just to get a break from her?

Some of my analogies are so stupid that I have to explain. I'm sure there are readers who have read the latest review on the new Mario Kart and felt the red shell effect of having no numerical score. But this game best demonstrates the fallibility of such a scoring system. I've had a lot of fun with Mario Kart games in the past: You get your friends together, you get drunk, everyone starts screaming at the TV, shells and banana peels are going everywhere, someone f---s up and maybe you come up with a joke that implies they have a small penis, then everyone laughs... in the end, you walk away thinking, "Man, that was fun as hell!" But you don't own the game, your friend does, so when you get home you don't play it - and, most important of all, you don't even really want to play

"Art is a completely subjective experience and, since video games are the highest form of art..."

it. If it's close at hand, sure, why not, but a game like that does little to take hold of your mind, to wrap itself around you. Was it fun enough to warrant a perfect 5 or 10? Sure it was. So why the disconnect? Why are you not obsessed with it, if it's so close to perfection? Which brings me to another perfect example: Metal Gear Solid 2: The Sons of Liberty. A game that's flawed, flawed, flawed, and everybody knows it. But then how come, when I wasn't playing it, I could think of nothing but playing it? How could the idea of Arsenal Gear, which is the manipulation of information in a digital age controlled by god-knows-who, pretty much affect the way I think about the way the world is run now? How could such a game have so strong an effect on me when it really only warrants a rating of like 2.5 to 3 due to its flaws? And Shadow of the Colossus is another good example. Where the f--k are my level-ups? My enhanced gear? Why is the landscape so devoid of monsters and cool monsters to destroy? Well that's going to count against it in the ratings department. But oh, there's also the fact that that game changed my

life forever and put me in a world that gave me an incredible amount of joy... does that change the rating calculation at all? No, of course not - where does that fit in? Graphics? Play control? Replayability?

And as for the idea that gamers are so busy that they can't read a three paragraph review and "need" to be able to glance at the numbers... come on. That's ludicrous. [Anyone] whose life is so hectic and so fast-paced and so "American" that he can't even read a short descriptive review about a field that he's interested in needs to sit down and chill the f--k out for a few minutes before he has a heart attack. Either that or just realize that life isn't something that can be rendered down into digits. Not life, and certainly not art, either. Anyway, I really like Play magazine, and on a 5 point scale I'd give it at least a 4.5. I would go through all its pro's and con's, but who f--king has time to read that shit?

- KBS



COMING JUNE 10, 2008



PLAYSTATION 3



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(((Developer Sound Off)))

Grand Theft Aspiration

words Brandon Justice

So it's 3:31 AM and the endless struggle between physics and fun is somewhere in my rear view mirror, just beyond the sea of bad radio commercials, fictitious personal ads and random revenge killings in the name of street pharmacy.

At this point, I've given up on making sense of how you give a game with a camera this unabashedly offensive a 10 and I'm left with one simple question: Precisely how many pedestrians does an illegal immigrant with a penchant for bipolar behavior have to mow down to get a less derivative gameplay experience before this generation comes to a close?

I mean really. Is this seriously all we've got?

Now, before you hit NEOGAF to elaborate of the Einsteinian observation that it's difficult to digest creative criticism from anyone who had a hand in *The Sopranos: Road to Respect* and *Napoleon Dynamite: The Game*, I'll simply say this: *GTA IV* isn't a bad experience – far from it.

Like a giant trademarked directional indicator in the sky, the trials and tribulations of Nikko Bellic and the desperate denizens of Liberty City are a fantastic benchmark in modern gaming. I'm sure there are some opportunist who will jump on the fact that it excels in the arena of excess like few before it, as this game has all the violence, drug abuse, and clever caffeine references an impressionable mind can handle. That said, *GTA* also happens to have a level of depth, character, and immersion that

genuinely changes the way the game feels. The city is alive, and though it's not perfect, it is such a huge step in the right direction for those looking to turn it up a notch in this generation.

The thing is, after 40+ hours of carnage and character, I kind of can't help but feel like some folks will miss the elements that make the game so much more compelling than the endless sea of experiences you've endured about guys with guns, cars, and bad attitudes over the last few generations.

“I’m speaking, of course, about the gaming industry’s nasty habit of chasing its own tail.”

Generally speaking, I tend to be a bit of an optimist, but I begin to think about who will actually get inspired by the game's sales, and then I start to imagine the physics-free flailing that will undoubtedly ensue in marketing power-lunches across the industry and it reminds me that there are worse things than “vote republican” bumper stickers and people who use videogame violence as a political platform.

I'm speaking, of course, about the gaming industry's nasty habit of chasing its own tail. It happened with the likes of *Halo*, *WoW*, and *Guitar Hero*. Further, I know of at least five *GTA* clones in development as I type this rant, and I can't help but get depressed.

I mean, billions of dollars are spent each year to propose, plan, and produce new products, yet all we see are 10 versions of a game we've already played to the point of pain and the simple question I'm left with is: why?

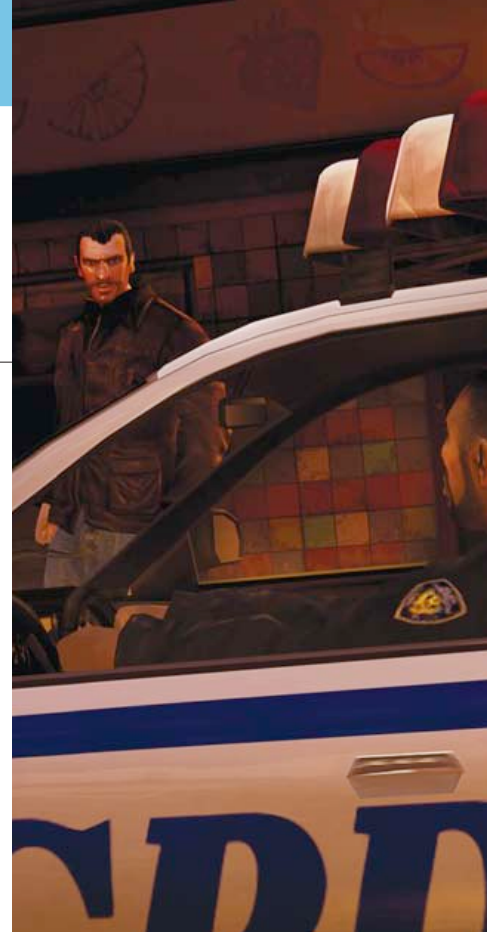
I know publishers have a chokehold on content in this industry, and I get it: “he who has the gold makes the rules.” But not everyone is bound by the sort of disappointing disconnect that drives the average executive, and yet we still end up in the same place.

Take Real Time Worlds, for example. The guys who created the *GTA* franchise leave Rockstar, start their own gig, Microsoft floats them a massive budget and the type of creative freedom the average team would kill for and they deliver...*Crackdown*? Damn, dudes. It was a fun game and everything, but as cool as it was to see folks couple attribute grinding with Liberty City 2020, I just wonder when someone will blow the doors off the basic model and do something daring with open-world gaming.

To date, we've essentially got *Gun* and *Oblivion* as passable examples of where the genre can go if we're willing to deviate. The former was a bit meh, but it was still more exciting to the average gamer than yet another gangster game. The latter went toe-to-toe with *Gears* and held its own, and yet following their lead doesn't seem to be in the cards, largely because it will mean taking a real risk in this “oops-averse” climate we've created, and I don't care what people say, it just bums me out.

It means fewer *Fallouts*. Less room for the playable power of *Portal*. And for what? A license-driven guarantee of an additional 500,000 units? That's great for the bottom line, but when it comes at the expense of our industry's ability to put itself in the creative driver's seat, I'd rather see us take more chances.

We've got so many unbelievably imaginative minds in our industry, yet

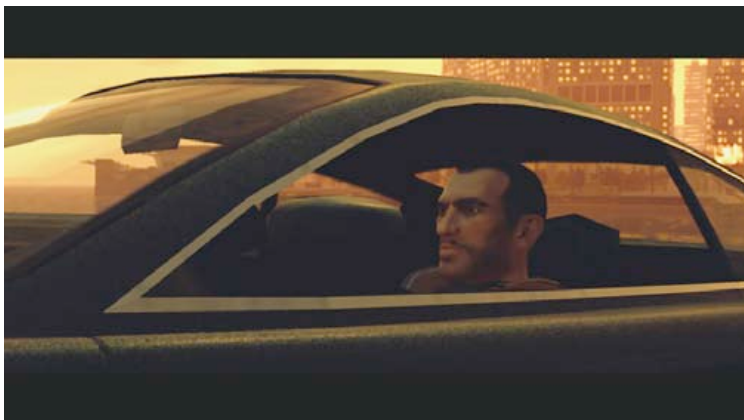


from where I'm sitting, it simply does not seem like we take them seriously. We stick them on ports, ideas they don't believe in, or franchises they're flat-out tired of working on, and this lack of inspiration **always** shows up in the final product.

I've churned out iterations of games that desperately need to be reborn. I've pumped out licensed products for publishers that could care less about the quality of their products or the end users who buy them because they know the license will push the product towards profitability either way. I've worked for companies who see both of these things as necessary evils to meet payroll, but no matter how hard I try to see their side of the story, I can't help but feel like it's all a heap of bunk.

I don't know...maybe I'm an idealist and an idiot. Maybe you guys are looking forward to *Shrekball 2009* and *Jumping Jacks with Juno* for Wii Fit and I'm totally fooling myself, but I can't help but think that gaming will take drastic leaps if somehow, some way, we find a way to escape from this vicious cycle. I see games like *Mirror's Edge*, *Spore* and *Left 4 Dead* and I can't even begin to tell you how badly I hope we do. I'd wager gamers who are tired of the same old thing hope we do, too.

Brandon Justice is doing his best to work on something decidedly different as Director of Game Design for Play Hard Sports. Feel free to e-mail all hate mail to bjustice@playhard.net.



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DATENATION

A new world of fire and steam

words Brady Fletcher



"I think doing things you can't do in real life is a really important part of the escapism of entertainment."

Damnation comes in many shapes and forms. Today, on the way to Blue Omega's lair in the heart of Annapolis, Maryland, the sky is dumping torrents of rain while news of tornadoes and death are left behind in the morning paper. Once inside the welcome safety of this first-time game developer's office, the journey toward discovering Damnation the game continues to unfold as lead designer Jacob Minkoff and producer Richard Gilbert guide me through hallways of rich concept art and computer screens that cut through the moody morning haze.

Damnation began rather unusually, born in the imagination of a group of guys who come from a film background and simply decided one day it was time to make the game they were dying to play. A clean slate tainted by no outside pressures sat on the design table, where Blue Omega spent months moving from an Unreal Tournament 2004 mod contest to what is on display today.

I've been told right away that Damnation is a shooter gone vertical. Or more specifically, as Richard begins, "It's the acrobatic movement, it's the climbing, it's about the adventure, seeing something above you and wondering how you're going to get to it and figuring out how to use your climbing abilities in the process."

"And we really wanted something epic," Jacob quickly jumps in. "Epics are about covering enormous amounts of distance, seeing huge environments, and most importantly, seeing your objective."

"We want the player to have this great experience, this great feeling of, wow, look at all the incredible stuff I'm doing," says Richard. "The developers never intended for me to get up on this roof this way. I found a totally different jump they never thought of and I bet you I bypassed a bunch of the game.' Haha—no, we actually planned it that way, we want you to break the rules."

A lot of talk today winds back through the larger idea of breaking rules, of what that means for the designer and the player. There is no arguing that rules often beg to be broken.

"Yeah, breaking rules, breaking rules is a really important idea," says Jacob. "That's something that we had on our development wiki and our initial concept, make the player feel like they're breaking rules. We figured out, what makes people feel like they're breaking these rules?

First, you establish the rules. And these rules are real-world rules, like here's an elevated platform, it's hanging off the side of a building, it's a fire escape. The proper thing is to climb the ladder to the next level or drop down to the previous level. But what if you vault over the railing and jump across the alleyway to the building on the other side? You're not supposed to do that. So we try to make sure that, at least once per section—we call them thematic areas. At least once per thematic area you're going to have to break a rule. And it starts to make you feel like Jackie Chan, there's always a kicking off a wall, a jumping onto a rooftop. People love GTA because they get to break rules. I think doing things you can't do in real life is a really important part of the escapism of entertainment. This is all over the place in Damnation."

Breaking rules is a choice, but how do you approach the idea of choice in a game that is still specifically laid out in some very deliberate, carefully directed ways?

"It's globally directed, says Richard, "but moment to moment full of choice. There are those open-world games

I really love. I sort of equate it to the idea of a three-year-old getting their own soda from the soda machine. I love Coke, and I love orange, and I love lemonade, and I'm going to put them all together—but then, oh my god, I don't want to drink this! I think that's the feeling that occasionally happens, it's like, you want choice, well here you go. Here's every choice you could ever want. Well, now there are so many choices I don't know quite what to do. What we're trying to do is find that balance. You've got choice, you won't feel trapped or claustrophobic or held down in the game, but you're not set adrift."

"It's about establishing goals," adds Jacob. "A lot of open-world games aren't goal-oriented enough. I guess it's also some function of the evolution of the play base. We all grew up here with videogames, and there was a time when I had a ridiculous amount of time to spend playing videogames. Now when I sit down and play a game, I want to know what I'm supposed to do, and I want to know that I'm going to get an entertaining experience during whatever amount of time I have to play. Damnation



as a directed experience is about giving you the choice to attack an environment the way you want to, find your own way out of it, find how you're going to meet your directive. If you like sniper gameplay, you grab a rifle, you climb across the rooftops sniping people from above. If you prefer more intimate combat, up close and personal, you grab a shotgun and go through the alleyways, vault through a window and smash somebody in the face from behind. You can rely on melee. Either way, you know within, say, the 10 minute sequence of a combat or puzzle-solving area, you're going to get that cool experience the developer wanted you to have.

You know, Half-Life 2 is a very directed experience; you know that no matter what you do there, it's probably gonna be cool within five minutes. I really value those types of experiences a lot. I value the other ones too, but I'm making the type that's the five-minute experience."

A totally open-world is not the holy grail. Call of Duty 4 sold through the roof, and that was about as linear and predigested as you get these days. Plenty of people loved it.

"People want the quality of the experience," says Richard. "Whether that experience is a very directed, linear, certainly not open-world one, that's fine. But whatever your direction, make sure it's of the highest quality. Whatever it is, that's what it comes down to."

Focusing on quality: of course, that's an easy thing to say in words.

"Staying true to your creative vision when realities of production intervene is always a really big problem."

"Staying true to your creative vision when realities of production intervene is always a really big problem," says Jacob. "And all we can do is hope that our production model and our planning and our management allow us to preserve the bits that make the game good. There are always bits that simply don't make it, but you have to remain true to the original vision, what serves the core of the experience. It doesn't matter if it's film, if you're writing a book, whatever, it's going to be hell to make at times. One way or another, things are going to fall by the wayside. Every feature that's been tried out and cut along the way, every piece of content goes away because we felt it didn't add enough to the core experience."

Some gamemakers complain that it's particularly hard, particularly frustrating in a way it wouldn't be in other mediums to make cuts during the process.

"Everybody makes cuts, you just have to stay true to the core vision," says Richard.

"You never know if a game will be fun until you play it. It's not even playable for a very, very long time," adds Jacob. "Even when you get to the first playable several months down the road, everything's busted, everything is probably scripted and fake, you don't really know what the final game will be like. If you try to do something like a mod, where you're just packing together the basic core ideas of the game as quickly as possible, then you get to play really early on. Then you can say, Ok, this is generally what the game is sort of kind of going to be, what worked, what didn't. That's really what the mod did for us. We drastically changed how the levels were built, what player abilities we were going to have, after the mod. The mod had a ridiculous amount of player abilities, and we had to admit, yeah, these ideas are great, but they're



another game. It was kitchen sink, too many things, we didn't know what the core was. So we were able to move forward with a much more solidified idea of what we wanted."

Are you learning to find a confidence in your ideas as you go along?

"Absolutely. When we talk about these core concepts," begins Richard, "these are the things that everybody on the team is passionate about. We want this in. This is fun, this is the way it has to be, we can't imagine the game without this. That is what the core is about. To have confidence in that, absolutely."

Developers sometimes speak as if they don't really know what the final vision is, it's sort of a guessing game most the way through.

"Backing up a bit, even though we are supremely confident in our ideas and will defend them to the end, we are still realists," admits Richard. "We want to put this in the hands of gamers. And we're not going to say, well, you know what, they're just wrong. We know better than they do. That's arrogant and stupid."

"Even on an individual feature basis, you certainly do need confidence, because, yeah, it's terrifying,"

says Jacob. "It's completely terrifying to be working on a massively expensive project like all videogames are, where you write something on paper and that's going to be hundreds and hundreds of man hours, and if it doesn't work out, it's on your head. And if it doesn't work out, it probably took development time away from something that was more important. Yeah, it's terrifying, and that's why you have to continue gut checking yourself against the core. I remember the dive roll, that was probably the biggest thing for terror on this project. We prototyped it the first time, it completely didn't work. We had to cut it from the mod because every time somebody would dive roll it would break something. But I was confident that we needed the dive roll in there! It took us like another eight milestones to get it in."

But it's in.

"Yes, it's now in," says Jacob, "and people see the potential now. And it's one of those things that..."

"I was against it," Richard admits. "I was like, you know what, this is just giving us a lot of trouble, I'm having a hard time fitting everything in to make it work."

"But that's a really good example," argues Jacob, "because you said that, and then..."

"So we said, what is it about acrobatic platformers that has that feeling that we really like?"

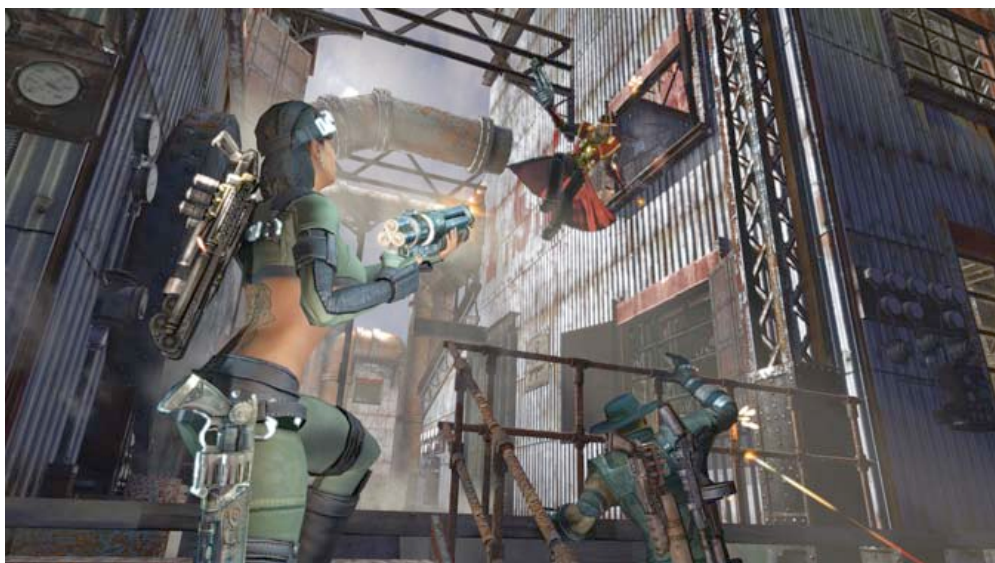
"I believe it now," replies Richard with a genuine tone of confidence.

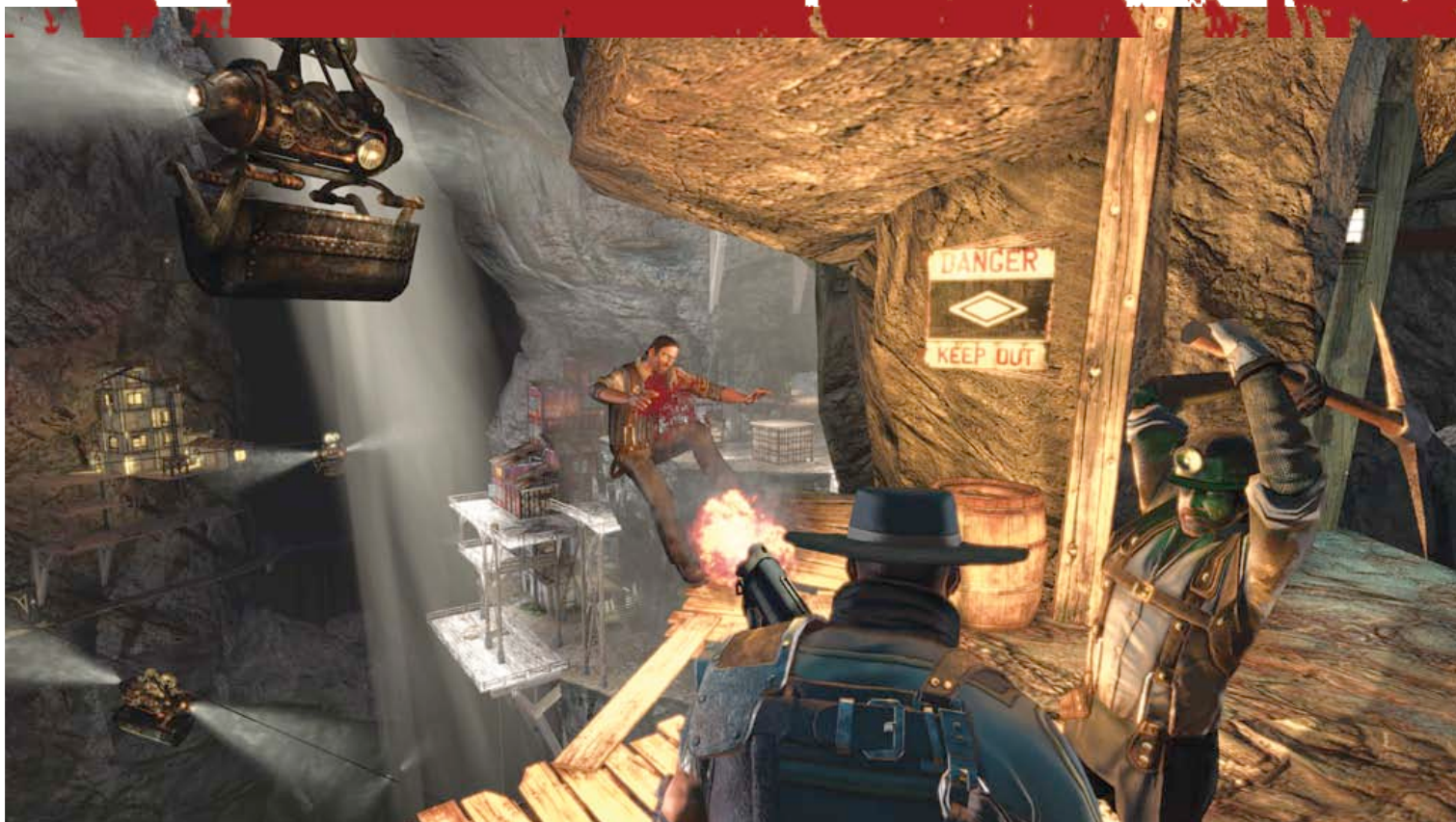
"We had to do a gut check with the core, and Rich said Ok, spirit vision is going to take a lot of time, it's a really big engineering task, can it be cut? Carl and I, the production manager and myself, we talked it over for a very long time, and we said look, all the other spirit abilities we're talking about along the way, those are for another game. They're awesome and they play really well, but they're a different game. Spirit vision, we made a very compelling reason why it served the core. If we didn't always remember, what is the core, what are we doing, then we wouldn't be able to accurately gutcheck those sort of things. Things might get cut that should be. I love that example, because we can talk about how that makes the player feel resourceful, it has all sorts of implications in multiplayer, it serves the stories as well from many different points. And that's why the feature stayed in."

So you're pleased with the spirit vision; point to a big feature that defines Damnation.

"We play these shooters," begins Jacob, "and we're also playing these platformers, and we're discussing, what's cool about shooters? It's about the really fast-paced combat, the twitch responsiveness, it's about the satisfaction of every bullet impact, it's about getting a head shot and seeing a guy go down. All those individual mechanics are what make the best shooters feel awesome. That's why they're fun. But they don't look that cool, especially first-person shooters. You've got the perspective, you've got the gun. The camera movement isn't really cinematic, the environments tend to be really small, and they push some crazy shaders, but it's not awesome for lack of a better word, it doesn't have the cinematic feel. So we said, what is it about acrobatic platformers that has that feeling that we really like? It's the acrobatic movement, it's the climbing, it's about the adventure, seeing something above you and wondering how you're going to get to it and figuring out how to use your climbing abilities to get to it. That's really satisfying and it looks really cool. When you get up to that point and look down, there's a great satisfaction. When we were trying to figure out how to blend the two, we went through a bunch of iterations. We said, Ok, maybe you're in first-person mode then you jump and grab something, then the camera switches out to third-person, you see the person climbing, then we go back in. But things like that we felt were too jarring. Especially for a shooter, because one of the most important things with a shooter is to make sure you never pull control away from the player. You need to move quickly—responsive control. Ultimately it came down to, Ok, we're going to have a button that switches between shooter mode and platformer mode. At this point, basically, you hold down a button, you draw your weapons, and all of the control becomes what would really be appropriate for a twitch shooter. You let go of it, and you have our special hybrid adventure-platformer mode that allows you to climb all around the world. I'm really most proud of how we've blended the two, how we've got that transition to work. That was a massive, massive design and engineering feat. I'm really proud of that."

I would argue no one seems to have the definitive answer on how you handle that challenge.





"Yeah, it's a big thing, and we've gone through some major changes," explains Jacob. "We ended up changing our entire player architecture to get it to a place we were comfortable with. We went to the third-person, Gears of War over-the-shoulder idea and found that we could do much smoother, much faster paced camera movements with that."

"Talk about confidence," says Richard. "That was one we had to get right, that was a big one we had to change."

"Yeah, that was major," exclaims Jacob in laughter. "I came in and I talked to Rich, I was like, I think we have got to make this change, I have a list of a dozen different reasons why we have to make this change, and I'm terrified. We decided to go forward with it, and I swear, every week there was a new reason why I was like, Oh great, I broke the game! I completely destroyed the design, there's no way we can do this. And then I'd go back to paper and I say, Ok, what can we do, this was an unforeseen issue when we made this architectural change, and eventually we figured out everything."

You know, watching the game play out conceptually, I'm really curious how you are approaching the pacing aspects. More directly, pacing is becoming a term people throw around and don't seem to know what they are trying to say. So what do you say to the broad concept of "pacing"?

"Pacing is all about figuring out what the player is experiencing emotionally and making sure they experience the opposite. You need contrast. I think contrast is a better way of looking at it," Jacob answers with a nod of confidence. "That's a little bit what Rich was talking

about earlier, you have to be in a tiny narrow cave to appreciate a massive wide canyon that you're going to open up to and see. You have to be in a pitched firefight to appreciate a creepy, darkly lit series of passageways that you go through afterwards. If the entire game was nothing but dark creepy passageways, you'd find yourself running through them at top speed. There is nothing that leads you to believe there might be something around that next corner, something you need to care about. I think the biggest problem with pacing is when games offer the same experience continuously over their entire length, or maybe the same two experiences repeating over and over, half and hour of this, half an hour of that, over and over. You need to try and break it up even more.

When we were mapping out the game originally, we were mapping it out in 45 minute chunks. We said, this 45 minutes here is going to be thematically this type of environment. What we did was, we had a hierarchy of world area sections. For instance, in the first large world you come to in the game, the overall theme is a mining colony set in a large canyon. Within that, the areas are mine tunnels, plateaus on canyon walls, then the main generator in the center. They each feel very very thematically different from one another. Within each of those, there are thematically different sections, and the sections may be thematically different because one of them has enemies and one of them doesn't. Or it might be because one of them is very vertical and one of them is very horizontal. Or it might be one of them goes up, and the other goes down. And that also goes back to the overall epic feel."

Layers and layers of one shifting theme and tone after another.

"Exactly. Layers and layers goes from the huge concept of the world will end if you don't stop the bad guy to the intimate sort of study of one character and the reason they want to be a part of this."

What is another key vision for Damnation?

"Well, we've been playing all these acrobatic platformers that have been coming out, and we just felt like there was an opportunity to have a really hardcore,

multiplayer focused shooter like we always loved," adds Jacob. "We would play Quake III after hours all the time. We just wanted to add to it all these moves you're used to getting in a platformer. We wanted to make it unique. We were tired of seeing the same sort of environments over and over again. World War II, space marines, that sort of thing is just so common."

Developers do seem to have a hard time tackling themes that move beyond the safety zone of... Look, you have this description of Damnation, Gears of War-meets-Prince of Persia or whatever. Are you caught in that trap because it's easy? Try to describe it beyond that.

"You're saying get away from the blah blah blah pitch," says Richard, chuckling because, well, it's true.

It's just something we're getting so locked into, that mentality of...

"No no no, I understand," Richard continues. "You know, this is a marketing thing that is easy to grasp, but I have to use it even in deterring this: we are trying to evolve the genre by taking the shooter and going vertical with it. I know that's that sort of line, but that is really what we focus on when we sat there and did all the design. This is fun: I want to go along, shoot some shit, blow up some guys, and then I'm gonna go play on this tall building and go climb it. That was what was fun, that was what was exciting."

Jacob jumps in: "We had seen some really amazing things happening with platformers. There were games like Ico coming out, Prince of Persia: Sands of Time. Ico had some of these enormous distances that you could see, I couldn't even believe it at the time."

Such a beautiful game.

"Yeah, it was amazing. You'd see something in the distance you'd get to a few hours later, and I was like, we need to make that part of a mainstream game. We need to be making a mainstream hardcore shooter that takes advantage of all these beautiful artistic things that other, sort of arthouse games, are doing. That was another of our big desires at the time, going vertical with the shooter. When you have been fighting through some dark tunnels and canyons and stuff, and then you come out into



“We would play Quake III after hours all the time. We just wanted to add to it all these moves you’re used to getting in a platformer.”

this huge open area and you see this city and there’s a generator in a distance and then you’re fighting toward that generator for the next hour, hour and a half. It takes you out of that—it takes you out of that thing so many shooters tend to do, tunnel room, tunnel room, tunnel room. It gives you much more of a sense of the world, of the space. It makes it feel much more like a real world, not just a shooting gallery. Shooting galleries are awesome gameplay-wise. But we felt like we could inject more of that cinematic feel, that epic feel. We wanted to make it epic. Something on the scale of Lord of the Rings. Epics are about covering enormous amounts of distance, seeing huge environments, and most importantly, seeing your objective and how you’re going to get there. *Lord of the Rings* is all about: there’s a tower, get to it.”

That’s powerful adventure. Your spirit lights up in anticipation of the journey—and for me, it goes back to the fulfillment of finally getting there. That’s the real achievement I look for.

“Exactly. And what happens along the way is about character, moments of action, the interpersonal relationships, even between the players and the enemies that really make the interesting part of the stories. Everything about Damnation is taking the hardcore shooter, taking everything good about it and going bigger. Opening it up, making it larger. I really think we’ve done some interesting things with that, I can’t wait for people to get their hands on it.”

What you are talking about is the truer definition of a cinematic game. Cut scenes are not what makes a game cinematic. How would you respond to that?

“I’ll go first, because Jacob’s answer will sound a lot better,” says Richard. “For me personally, developing a cinematic experience is about controlling the player’s emotion, it’s sort of their adrenaline through the process. And making them appreciate the different elements that move them. Going from hallway to room, hallway to room, you don’t appreciate a narrow, claustrophobic space unless you just came from a wide open one, and vice versa. We’re going to ease you through this, we’re going to guide you through this really dark, narrow, twisted hallway and make you feel claustrophobic so we can open up into a larger space. So really having control over the player’s experience from an emotional and sort of subconscious level would be my definition. So go Jacob.”

“Well yeah, building off that, without the lull in the action you don’t appreciate the action. Without the small space you don’t appreciate the large space. But even beyond that, when you talk about cinematics, one of my pet peeves in games is, when you see the character player doing something in the cinematic sequence that I can’t do in game. So that was one of our mandates right off the bat, that we would never ever do something in a cutscene that you could never do in game. And vice versa, whatever you do in a game, we want it to be worthy of cutscenes. You play Ico, you play Prince of Persia: Sands of Time, you play Tomb Raider, all those rely heavily on scripted camera positions. So what we had to do with our level design and also with our whole dynamic camera system was create levels where, just by virtue, how the player was going to have to round the corner, how a path is curved, we knew



the player was going to see these huge vistas, these really cool things we wanted them to see. There was a whole page on our development wiki where I took pictures of Ico and different pictures of movies and I said, this shot works right here because they’re foreshortening the distance. So we made sure while we were building everything, we would take advantage of all these sort of film tricks. It feels like you are traveling more distance than you actually are because of the way everything is shaped. It’s about playing with perspective, playing with light and shadow, playing with depth, in the same way you would frame up a shot in a movie, we build the shape of our levels and make sure the player is going to come into those places from the area we want to frame. That’s really the cinematic idea of Damnation.”

Is there not a disconnect when you go from a cut scene to gameplay?

“If you try to tell a story that is completely in gameplay, your biggest problem is that you’re going to be limited to a story that can be told in real time and from the player’s perspective. Something we actually ran into with Damnation, you can’t tell an epic story from player

perspective alone. You always need to know what other factions are doing, what’s happening in other places. You always need to cut away and see what, like, enemy forces are doing, how they’re moving across the map, things like that. So our compromise was that we decided not to have cinematics during the course of any mission. Between mission breaks, we have cinematics that say, ‘meanwhile over here, this is going on.’ It’s just time cuts. So don’t worry about them, we’ll come back to them in a moment. And then we’ll come back to them when we get to the next mission. During the course of the various missions, we try to keep everything in game. Which is a compromise. I don’t think anyone has figured out a completely adequate solution for it. It’s something we are going to be looking at more and more. Our next project we’re talking a lot more of everything in game. I think it will be an interesting process to see the whole industry evolve.”

You talk about compromising. Are we too caught up in trying to blend the film language with the game language?

“I think that probably everyone working in games has a tendency to want to replicate what they’ve seen in movies they’ve liked. The easiest way to do that is in a cut scene.

“We need to be making a mainstream hardcore shooter that takes advantage of all these beautiful artistic things that other, sort of arthouse games, are doing.”

It's frankly an easy way out."

It's what you know.

"Yes, exactly. There's going to have to be some visionary who does something really crazy where everyone will say, Oh, why didn't we think of that? I think experiments like Half-Life and BioShock and these other games that have proven you can tell a story interactively, are definitely steps in the right direction. I don't know if they invalidate the other type. I think that there's probably something on the horizon we have yet to see. And I'm looking forward to somebody figuring it out. Maybe it will be us, maybe it will be somebody else."

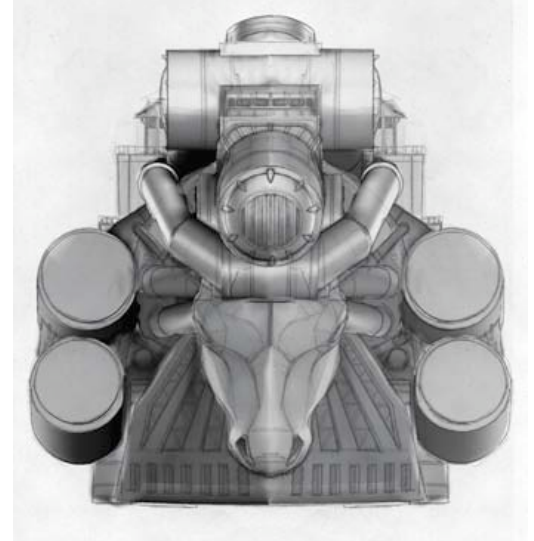
Are we getting too focused on creating the worlds? I'd say we aren't focused enough with these larger-scaled games.

"I think there is a lot of validity to just creating atmosphere, just creating a world," says Jacob. "That's not what we're doing with Damnation, we're trying to equally balance atmosphere and gameplay. But look at Will Wright, he makes toys, he makes software toys. He doesn't actually make—he almost doesn't make a game. He makes a bunch of rules that you can play with. In that same vein, GTA. GTA is almost not a game. They put in missions just for the hell of it. There are some games, Oblivion, Assassin's Creed, any of those, that we love them because we want to explore that world, we want to experience that world. In Damnation, we wanted to have that same sort of compelling atmosphere in this type of game, and to again have that directed experience. But I have to go back and say, the genesis of Damnation was

playing Quake III. So you really have to look at this, we wanted Quake III, we want that gameplay but we want to do it in a more cinematic space. That's what it really comes down to."

Quake III, any game like that—and we're kind of getting away from this—is a fairly stripped down concept when you really look at it.

"That's another thing we did up front: we wanted an intuitive experience, we wanted the player to be able to say I need to get there, how am I going to do it," explains Jacob. "And they can trace their path back and figure out, Ok, there's a rock that gets close enough to that building, so I can wall jump off that, get to the roof, then jump to there and climb up to the next ledge. Somebody else might find a completely different way. Now again, Damnation is a very directed experience. So as opposed to a game like Assassin's Creed that allows you to climb on everything, and there's not much direction beyond you need to get to that dot on the map. Damnation, we focus on each one of those specific paths. We said, Ok, this combat environment is going to have 12 different paths, they will connect at these 7 different places, giving us a total of this many possible ways through the environment. Now we make sure, path number one: it has 5 different acrobatic abilities you are going to have to do on it, and this is what they are, this is how they are chained together. This we are considering our template of cool; this was cool, this felt fun. All the other 11 paths have to match that, they don't have to require the same abilities, they have to feel cool. If you are going to jump and grab a



scaffold and then you're going to swing up and jump and smash through a window, then we need to have to have something similarly action-hero feeling in every situation."

Action hero can mean a lot of things, but I sense quite the departure in a lot of ways from what we're used to in terms of where that action takes place.

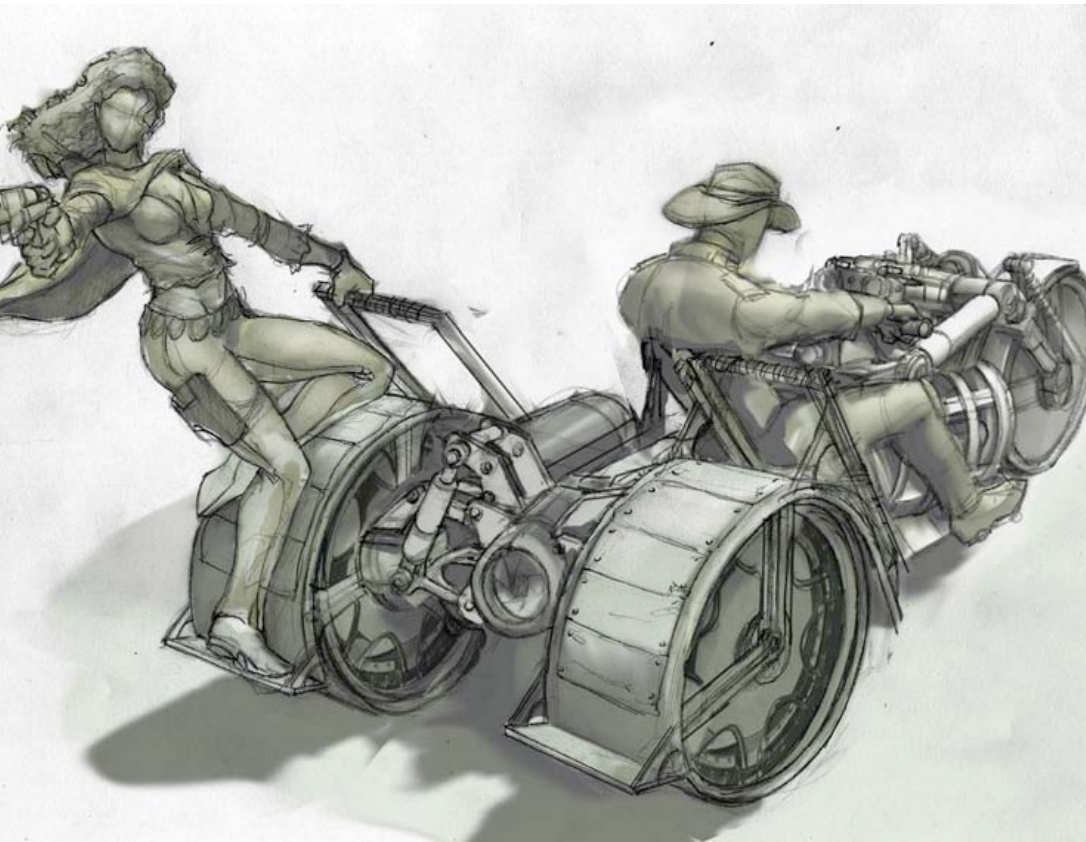
"We needed to have the kick ass weapons, we needed to have the huge machines," explains Richard. "But it was really about drawing from iconic elements in American history. We've had the industrialization of the northeast, we've got the plains of the Midwest. We've got elements of the west coast, the gold rush, we've got a whole list. Just drawing from everything. Even the iconic element of the hat. When you look at the antagonist characters—it's that contrast again—most of the characters are all sort of northeast/Nazi influence. Most of the protagonists are more western/southwestern influenced."

Yeah, I like that blending of a wide swath of culture, it lends quite the spirited identity to the game. And I see that as the hero, it looks like you have quite the cast of supporting characters.

"We thought it was important to have NPCs going along with you," explains Jacob. "A big reason: when you play an epic story, or when you see or read or experience an epic story in any way, it often boils down to—get there, blow something up. Get there, kill something. It's all about the interpersonal relationships along the way, it's all about the character moments. We wanted to have NPCs with us the whole time which would have their own story arcs, have their own personalities, we would learn what their reasons are for fighting, why they are with you along the way. Plus the game is playable in co-op, so it was obviously important to have a character beside you."

As I watch Richard reveal snapshot sections of the Damnation world, the massive sense of scale begins to engulf the scene.

"We're primarily dealing with large, outdoor spaces," says Jacob. "But you go through cities, plenty of man-made areas. One thing that is kind of unique about Damnation, which we haven't really talked about: Pretty much every building you see you get inside of in some way. We felt it was important to make the player feel resourceful and make a realistic feeling of space. In the



original design we were planning on only climbing around the outside of buildings. But then we started building out the inside, and we thought, oh my god, this feels so much more real. What it turned into was... the idea of taking cover behind things has always been an FPS thing, a hardcore shooter thing. Even before Gears of War and the whole sticky cover sort of thing, the idea of dodging behind something to avoid enemy fire was a basic strategy. So when we wanted to create cover for the player to dodge behind, avoid enemy fire, and do all of those awesome shooter elements, we originally started out with, Ok, let's place some concrete blocks on the ground; I guess you crouch behind them like everyone else. But then we started putting these completely fleshed out buildings in the spaces, and we discovered, these are the cover. You don't need to place all those concrete blocks and contrived cover points. I think a lot of cover-based games look a bit like Frogger. What we're trying to do with Damnation is keep everything really organic."

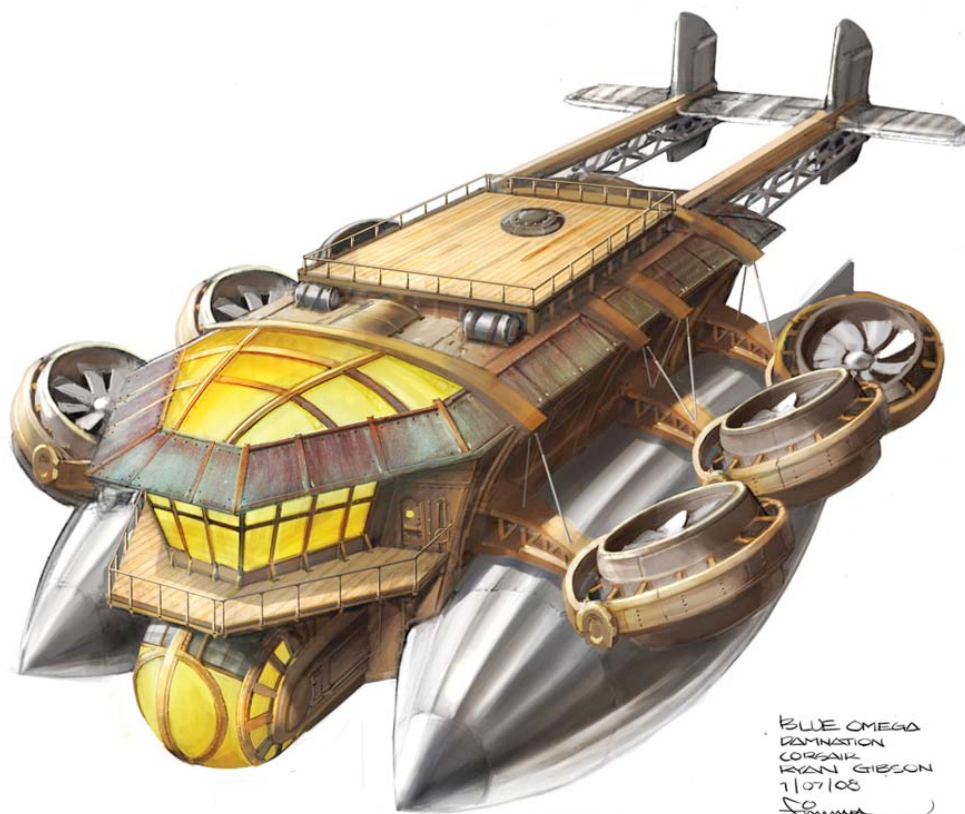
That Frogger image is an appropriate way of putting it.

"To be fair to Gears of War, it does a really great job at what it does. It's very structured, it's very much about having those contrived spaces where you have a bunch of lines and you're going to be jumping over them," says Jacob. "This is going to be about finding your way through spaces."

Since we're on Gears of War, am I unfair in saying your introductory level is awfully familiar?

"To some degree, that is deliberate. We want to introduce people to the game in a way that is familiar," explains Richard. "We want our initial batch of screenshots to look like something they understand. We don't want to scare people away. This is a game that at first will look somewhat like something you already know, and then becomes other things. Shooter fans are used to these gritty, war-torn worlds that look like this, but once you're in, we really start to introduce newer elements."

Here is when I watch the main character bound





backward off a pipe, catching a ledge and flipping around like a dolphin at ease in water. My enthusiasm for the coolness of the move pleases the room.

Richard begins laughing, "That's exactly what we want."

Now guns are blazing, and this is clearly not a duck-and-cover affair.

"This is a run-and-gun, a full run-and-gun game," agrees Jacob. "That's why the dive roll is there. We have combat mode where you are moving around slowly, you can evade, you can strafe, you can do all the things that are important for shooters. But then we have multiple levels of speed in adventure mode, and each level of speed causes different context sensitive actions. So if you're just running normally you'll vault over objects and stuff like that, but if you're sprinting while you're jumping towards something it does completely different actions. You may dive roll through something rather than jumping up and vaulting over. That goes back to the twitch gameplay: if you really start learning the distances, really start learning the correct button presses at the right speed, you can get through the environment much faster than your opponent. In multiplayer levels, it's hugely important to start to learn to use these different abilities."

These larger games, you have to slow it down, you have to have time to regain a connection with the world and temper the twitch of the gun. Even these bits and pieces look like the artists really are crafting natural spaces as much as transparent levels.

"That's something I've really focused on with our world-building team," says Jacob. "When we sit down and start building the space, we talk about the story behind the space. We talk about the people who live here, what do they believe, what do they do, how do they get to work. Yeah, every so often you're going to run into situations in this game where it doesn't seem like there is any way any normal person could have possibly come through the environment. But mostly we want the world to feel like you're going through a space that is a real space people could have inhabited."

You've got these crumbling areas I see. Is this some sort of post-apocalyptic thing going on?

"What we always say is industrialized war-torn," says Jacob. "Apocalyptic implies that there is complete anarchy, there's no infrastructure left. One of the things we talk about is wanting to have this idea that until recently, maybe the past year, these places were completely inhabited. As you go through the game, you get to areas that are more and more recently under attack. We get to an area, maybe 8, 10 hours into the game, that is currently

under attack."

What is the timeline?

"The east coast has basically completely fallen at this point. The east coast has been completely taken over by Prescott Standard Industries, they've wiped out the US government and all the army forces. As you progress through the game, you are moving further and further toward the west coast. So by the time you get to the west coast nothing has been hit yet."

The idea of seeing this giant path trail off behind me, seeing the remaining expanse slowly unfold ahead: that's good stuff.

"I love coming back to *Lord of the Rings*, that felt like a real world. If you look at the production detail that they went into—actual Dwarvish on scraps of paper in Moria. And the thing is, you don't pick up that there's Dwarvish there, but the overall space feels more real because of all those details. So we tried to put in enough that you get that feeling but not so much that you're going to have a framerate of 15."

Richard is now leading me through concept designs, beginning to introduce the vehicles of the world—some giant lumbering transports that tower several stories, others jet-powered choppers that look like they were bolted together from a rash of spare parts.

"When we sit down and start building the space, we talk about the story behind the space."

"Our art director is extremely into that sort of thing. He builds 1950s ray gun replicas at home," explains Jacob. "But what he does, he goes through junk files, through thrift stores and stuff like that, and finds pieces to cobble together for these ray guns. We wanted someone who could make weapons and machinery look like they could work."

The vehicles look like they're on race tracks. So you're not really driving around in open spaces that much?

"Yeah, it's again about the epic journey, it's about covering distance. We really wanted the player to feel like they're going somewhere. When it's something cool like this, it's about really wanting to get to that next environment. All the driving sequences are designed so you can theoretically beat it on the first try."

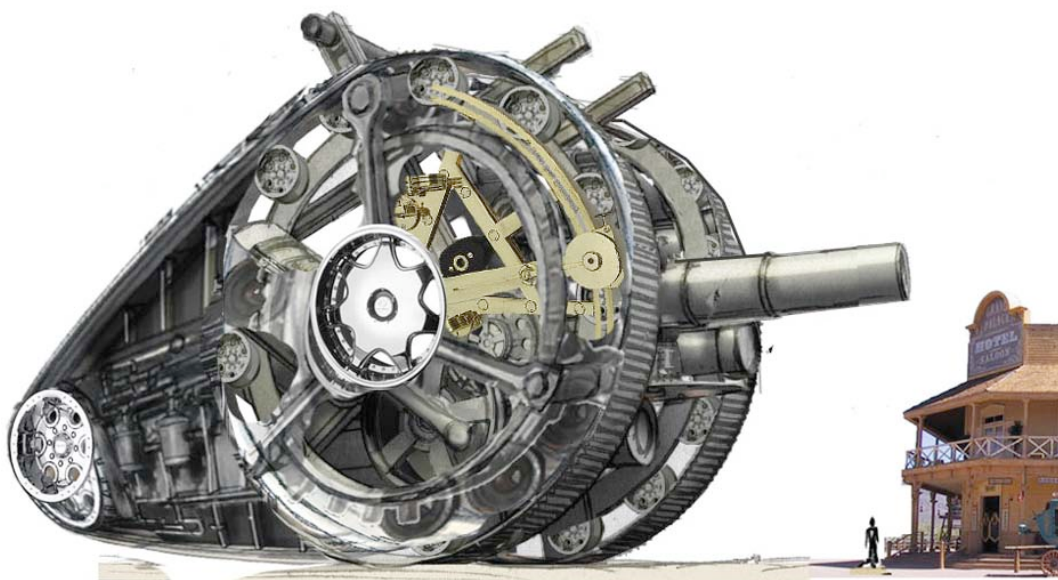
"If we made it that you had to master vehicle physics, it takes away that this is a shooter," Richard points out.

"Sometimes we use vehicles to solve puzzles as well; navigational puzzles are a big part of *Damnation*," says Jacob.

What I'm seeing, this is all based in some alternate version of America?

"An America based on the idea of what would have happened if this war would have occurred and drove technology in a different way in the late 1800s, early 1900s. Prescott Industries introduced a lot of mass-produced technology into America and basically, with our timeline, during the Civil War, they were providing all sorts of new military technologies to the North and the South, and they made a lot of money off that, building up their own army secretly while developing their own advanced technology. Watching the war from a distance, when both sides were weakened, they swept in, wiped them out, and now they're moving over western territories."

We have all these different looks that are very America influenced, but America on a different scale. Yeah, there were mining boom towns, but one built precariously on the side of a cliff at a massive scale with a generator that is 40 stories tall in the middle? It's hyper real. We talk about hyper real a lot. An example here is a mining colony, a generator runs the whole mining area. Your goal through





this level is to get through the canyon where a comrade is being held hostage. Down a canyon wall, and from there you head to the generator and blow it up to disable this particular arm of Prescott using any more mining operations here."

You talk of the exploration, the straight shooting. I'm assuming you're staying away from too much micromanagement?

"If we had health pickups, then you'd be micromanaging your health. If ammo was hard to come buy, you'd be micromanaging your ammo," explains Richard. "It's not about that kind of thing. A game like *Resident Evil* is more about that. The core to *Damnation* is going through this environment on this epic quest, covering tons of ground, doing cool abilities, shooting tons of enemies. Cutting a swath of destruction through the world. We don't want you to worry about too many details, we just want you to be lost to the experience."

What sort of relationships are going on with the characters?

"The main character is Captain Hamilton Rourke. He fought in the big wars on the east coast before joining the peacemakers to fight against Prescott. His fiancée Dayden, a native healer, was in a medic troupe before dying in an attack. The relationship between he and his fiancée plays into it; he believes she is still out there somewhere."

In our mythos, all female natives are healers, all male natives are seers, and Yakecan and her brother are the lone survivors of their tribe. Their tribe was wiped out by Prescott about 15 years prior. You make a trip to Yakecan's brother Akahando, who bestows the gift of spirit vision upon you early on."

The spiritual themes, are you looking at Native American influences?

"We took everything from American history we thought was very strong. We felt it really hasn't been

tapped that much for fantasy," explains Jacob. "What we wanted was an epic sci-fi fantasy series that was uniquely North American. We wanted to create a world that pulls from what we know, that takes advantage of all the really cool icons that movies have tapped into for years, but videogames really haven't. We have so much awesome iconography. *BioShock* is a really good example of something that took art deco style and made an entire look of their game around that 1920s art deco. We wanted to do a very similar sort of thing, take a very strong iconic look and build around that. Some of what we're using is fairly nondescript, and then we introduce the stronger American icon influences, you saw we've got the southwest with that mesa, we've got the mining towns, the Rockies, we have mission architecture later on. We have 1930s post depression-era New York architecture. There's all sorts of things. As we progress from organic to industrial, we go much more into depression-era architecture. Prescott's main fortress itself is based entirely around depression-era New York. We pull a lot from World War 1 as well."

I like the idea of exploring World War 1. It's a little more mysterious, there's more disconnect from the modern world.

"Yeah, exactly," says Richard. "It had a much more rugged sort of feel to it, and that's one thing we've always said about our technology and machinery. It's not Victorian, it's not spindly little things that are like, oops, I broke it."

"And it's not really machined, nice curves, smooth chrome, stuff like that," says Jacob. "Nothing from the 1950s onward makes it into our game. It's too smooth, it's too pretty."

What kind of timelines are you following?

"It is early 1900s alternate America. The whole story itself takes place across 36 hours. We have a

really in depth timeline we wrote that explains how the world got here. We made this as sort of a multimedia property. We wanted to be able to have graphic novels, to have movies, that sort of thing, so we felt it was really important to know what else was in the world."

"You were talking about confidence in your ideas. It's a pretty ballsy thing we're doing with all this detail," says Richard. "But again, it's more about developing a quality of concept. In order to really understand how these characters are going to be interconnected, how all these events come together, we need to explore a larger dynamic, we need to set up a backstory, we need to have those pieces of paper with Dwarven all over the floor so it all fits. We have piles and piles of extra stuff sitting around. Players will never see it, they'll never know about it, all that level of detail goes into building these characters."

This ornate, excess detail...

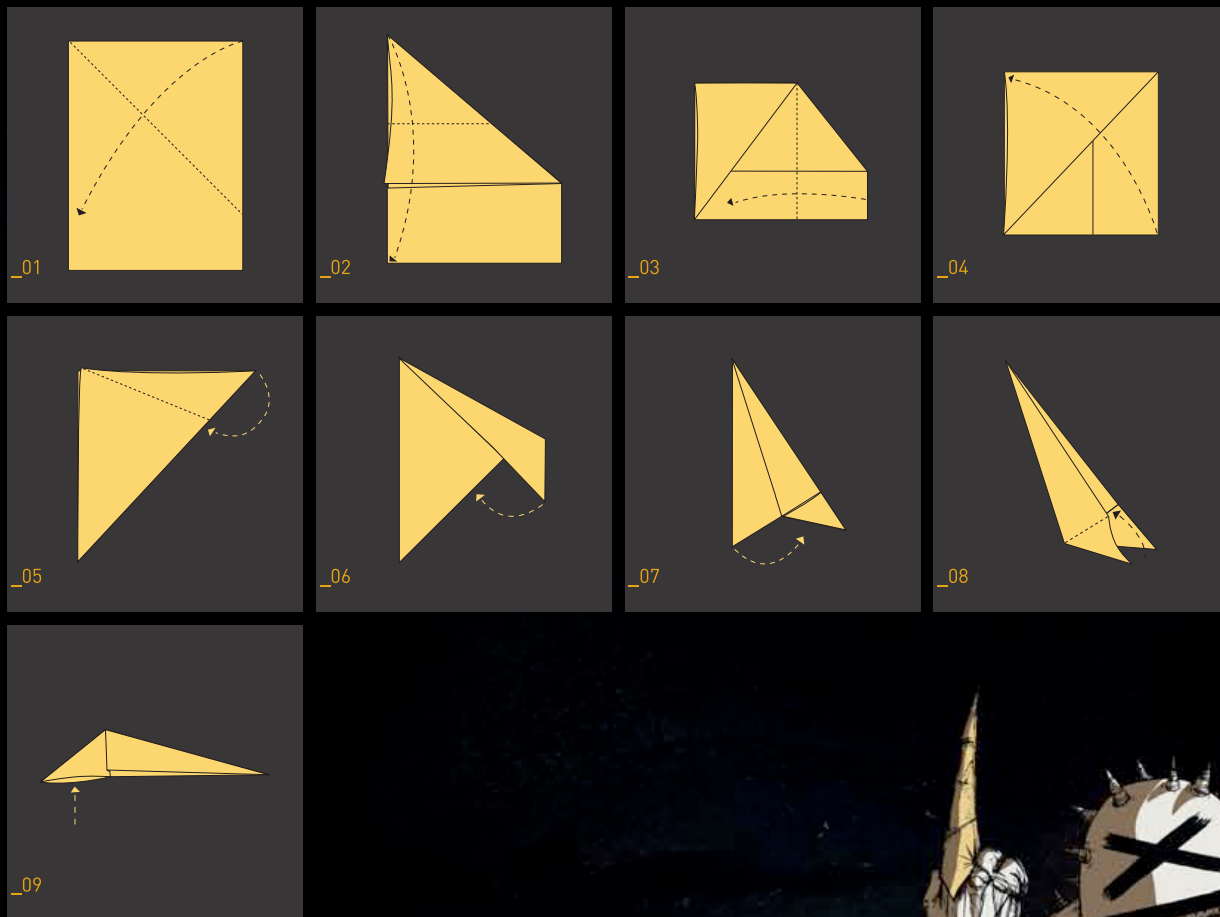
"If you look at depression-era architecture, there's always something that the sculptor put in that didn't need to be there. You'll see that in some of our designs."

Here is the moment when all this talk about a bad-ass action hero inevitably leads to the introduction of the weapons. One in particular "is basically a retrofitted nail gun that's meant for driving railroad spikes into railroad ties. But when you use it as a weapon it can pin enemies against walls, knock them back with incredible force."

But clearly you're staying within a certain boundary of reality and not going too overboard for the sake of it.

"And that's exactly right," says Jacob. "That's one thing we came back to when serving the core. We don't want the game to get too complex. So we sorted... Everyone loves to use the Einstein quote: simplify as much as possible and no further. That's really what we did. We simplified the game to the point that it has everything it needs to be fun, but we didn't go past that."

Tear out the opposite page
and fold into shape.

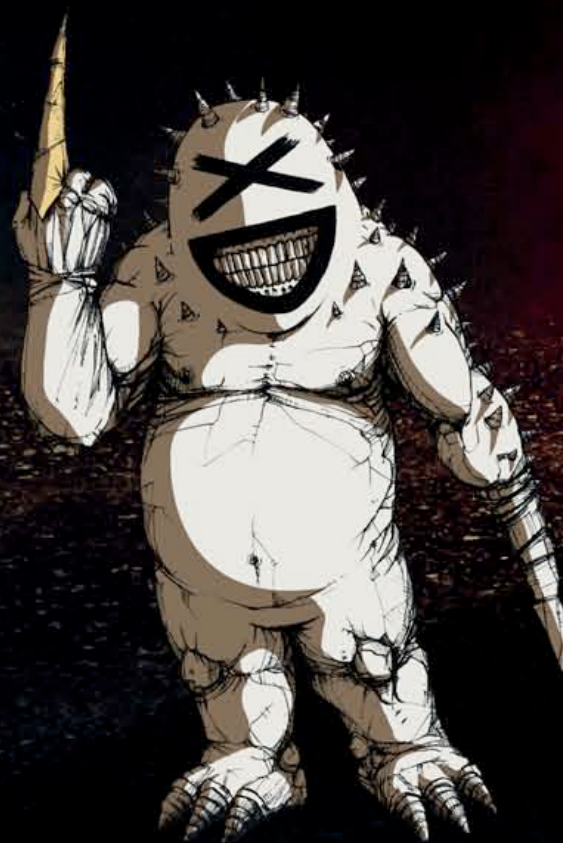


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what moves you

Gears of War 2

Geared up, part deux

words Greg Orlando

Cliff Bleszinski promises a bigger, bloodier package with the third-person shooter Gears of War 2. Indeed, Gears will offer players the opportunity to perform, as the game's design director Bleszinski calls it, "the chainsodomy," and experience "that nice, crispy crunch" of a foe's snapped neck.

Gears of War 2 takes place six months after the events of the first game. Things have not gone well during this time. "Humanity," Bleszinski says, "is not just backed up against the wall, they're about to be tossed over that wall."

The war picks up with Marcus Fenix loading up on Betty, a huge four-wheeled derrick, for a strike on the alien Locust Horde's subterranean base. As a sign of how bad things are, the derricks ride in a convoy manned and operated by "the stranded"—humans who have been displaced and forced into military service.

What follows is a frantic 15-minute or so introductory sequence. Fenix and his allies load up on a convoy of derricks, setting out for a series of huge lifts that will eventually take them to the Horde. The derricks' advance is hotly contested, however, first with a series of flaming boulderlike artillery attacks (called "cysts") and then with ground forces. The chaotic scene is punctuated with explosions, huge boulders being exploded off nearby hillsides, screams of battle, and gunfire aplenty. Gears does a fine job of selling the battle, with enemies coming in from all sides and the hearty din of soldier's screams.

It's Fenix's job to destroy the cysts before they wreck Betty, but the Locust Horde quickly supplements its artillery with the air force. Reavers fly in from all sides, assaulting Betty until it suffers enough damage to warrant repair. Here, players are faced with the task of repelling the Horde's troops until the derrick is repaired. This serves as the introduction to ground combat, with the Horde opening emergence holes and pouring forth from underground.

When the derrick is repaired, things begin to heat up. Horde grapplers assault the derricks, and Fenix can



Duck and cover, or here, shoot.



"Humanity is not just backed up against the wall, they're about to be tossed over that wall."

—Cliff Bleszinski, design director,
Gears of War 2

repulse the attacks by shooting at the enemy's hooks. At this point, Fenix may be called upon to repel boarders from his own derrick, engaging in chain saw duels with his enemy. Mashing on the Xbox 360 controller's B button is the key to winning these duels; "I think if I saw another QTE [quick time event], I might stab myself in the neck," Bleszinski says. And should Fenix win his battle, the results will be suitably gross and satisfying—one unfortunate duel victim was sliced from the neck diagonally down to under the armpit, with the severed section falling away in cartoonlike fashion. Approach an enemy from behind, and Fenix can dismember it from the ass upward. Call that the aforementioned "chainsodomy." The game's protagonist can also capture a Horde soldier and use it as a shield against gunfire, finally disposing of the hapless foe by snapping its neck and unceremoniously tossing it off the moving derrick.

A nearby derrick is commandeered by the Horde, and this sets up a scripted confrontation between two huge vehicles jostling one another for a bridge crossing. Meanwhile, Reavers attack from the air, and Fenix must either shoot down the beasts or their riders, and huge bipedal Brumaks either slam derricks with their bulk or assault them with the huge guns they carry on their



heads. Shooting these guys in the face will kill them, but it takes plenty of hits to bring them down. Huge, spiderlike Corpers appear next and these, too, must be defeated before the derricks can enter enemy territory.

The idea here is that the derricks are towing huge "grind lifts," devices that can pierce the ground and allow human soldiers to invade the Horde's terrain. Make no mistake about it, an invasion is absolutely necessary, as the enemy has discovered a way to destroy a whole city at a time.

Oddly, Bleszinski says Gears of War 2 will be more

"girlfriend friendly" in terms of its dynamic cooperative play. Here, players will be able to choose two different difficulties as they're blasting away in the same game. Or, perhaps his insistence on a grander scale for the proceedings, plus "more intimate violence," will somehow be the key to tapping a broader audience.

The Gears have been oiled with the promise of more enemies onscreen, and Epic seems to have delivered on this. War resumes sometime in November.



Guitar Hero World Tour

Garage Hero

words Heather Campbell



"You can design your own rocker, your guitar, your drums, and your logo. And you can make your own songs."



The last thing Neversoft and Activision want to do is remind you of Rock Band. But as the next Guitar Hero comes out with a microphone and a drum kit, it's hard not to think of Harmonix's flagship rock-rhythm action game. They *both* have drums. They *both* have mics. But look, here: Guitar Hero World Tour's drum kit can respond to changes in velocity, and features false cymbals. The drum pads are silicon, and silent! Take that, Rock Band!

Sure, it's an obvious direction for Neversoft, but it's hard not to imagine a world wherein Harmonix brings out a *new-newer* drum kit, with real cymbals, and Neversoft responds with a snare and a cowbell. Cut to 2010, when our living rooms are filled with fake equipment, and all of us realize we could be touring in an actual band if we'd spent this much time learning how to play real music.

The big to-do in the next Guitar Hero game isn't the drum kit, though. Or the new, secret guitar. The selling point of the whole package is customizability. You can design your own rocker, your guitar, your drums, and your logo. You can make album covers.

And you can make your own songs.

Guitar Hero World Tour's virtual studio allows players to write songs on lead, bass, and rhythm guitars ... and toss in drums, too. Snapping music into a certain key, the guitar-controller can switch through octaves, and also run the drum-kit. Drums are held on beat by a bpm lock, but individual beats (and notes) can be toggled in an advanced mode. After a song is finished, players can upload the whole thing to Live or PSN, and share their creation with everyone in the world. That means every song you've ever wanted to play in Guitar Hero will probably be noodled out by someone, somewhere. I'm betting that The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya ending theme hits GH Tunes fifteen seconds after the game hits store shelves.

For those too lazy to write their own music, the next Guitar Hero game will feature a longer list of pre-packaged tracks than any GH game to date, and all of them will be master tracks. Even the Wii is getting downloadable songs, and there's a possibility that all of the music will be transferable to future editions of Guitar Hero. There's so much shoved into GHWT that it's hard to focus on any one thing. Even the venues looked incredible (though we've been asked to keep the locations a secret, sadly) ... as did the dynamic camera angles during shows.

As exciting as it all is, let's just hope that we arrive at the definitive equipment set soon, though. Can we just call it at Guitar Hero? What's that? Konami's got a rock game coming out? Here we go again ...



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Resistance

Man continues the resistance with giant guns

words Brady Fletcher



In Resistance 2, you will have the opportunity to join 59 other players and duel it out for online supremacy. That's 60 human players, at the same time, on the same map, running around shooting powerful weapons at each other. History may hint that, to more than a few gamers, this sounds like a recipe for a) unchecked chaos, b) anti-fun c) frustration, d) no thank you.

"I agree. I'm totally with you," exclaims Insomniac's Colin Munson, associate creative director, Resistance franchise, who is demonstrating this limited online sampling during a Sony pre-E3 gamer's day in Hollywood. You might be surprised to hear that Insomniac agrees with the sentiment that online matches have become a little bit too intimidating too much of the time. "I hate getting my ass handed to me," adds guy.

Agreed. As someone who gravitates toward the first-person shooter, the last time I gave a shit about online competitive play was with... Quake II?

"Resistance 2 would like to offer you an alternative to the strained hardcore motif."

Yes, you could infer that I suck at games in the typical multiplayer arena, not quite up to tournament level standards, and for the rest of you who also suck and would actually, you know, enjoy a more casual, fulfilling experience online, Resistance 2 would like to offer you an alternative to the strained hardcore motif. One way to offer a more even-handed playing field is by rewarding even the most rudimentary demonstration of skill with an achievement that can affect various stat levels. But if you're the guy who is the true king of the hill, you'll inevitably be branded with the most prominent achievements, supplying more incentive to the players who want you in their sights in search of the added reward; the more timid soldier can stick to the sidelines if they so choose and still find plenty of battle incentives.

Resistance 2 has migrated the war between man and the alien Chimera from Europe to American soil, and today I am witness to a rural logging locale known as Scotia (behold the pancake house in the middle.) This map is notably huge, framing 30-on-30 skirmishes while teams of 5 compete for simple objectives like defend the mill. The pairing down of squads with shifting goals and mini-rivalries is one way Insomniac wants to place a more focused lens on structured tactics.

Let the hardcore types be the ultimate judge, but for now, Insomniac has just piqued a casual online player's interest for the first time in a long while.

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Dead Space

The return of Space Invaders

words Greg Orlando

Issues of space weigh heavily on everyone's minds today. Game writers are packed almost shoulder to shoulder inside a dark and cramped demonstration room.

Outside, people are generally having a well-lubricated time. Electronic Arts is showing off a good crop of its 2008 titles at a San Francisco eatery it's rented just for this occasion. The bar is open and the masses are enjoying the zombie shooter *Left 4 Dead*, the card-based fantasy real-time strategy *BattleForge*, a brand-new skating game in *Skate It*, and the now long-in-the-tooth massively multiplayer opus *Warhammer Online*.

In the dark, however, there's only *Dead Space*.

Dead Space conjures up images of Interplay's creepy run-and-gun adventure *Run Like Hell*. In fact, *Space* is very nearly a dead ringer for *Hell* in terms of its plot and gameplay mechanics. Both are apocalyptic, third-person space epics with a solitary hero fighting a rampaging enemy whose forces not only menace a seemingly deserted space station, but appear to be converting the structure into a biological mass. Both also rely heavily on the grand triumvirate of mysterious circumstances, genuinely frightening moments, and gore.

Space could, in fact, be the spiritual, next-generation successor to *Run Like Hell*. It's odd, then, the developers showing off the game don't see it.

Trouble has come to the *USG Ishimura*. A "planet cracker" *Ishimura* is the ultimate strip miner; it destroys a planet to harvest its resources. Something, as often happens, has gone awry, however. Engineer Isaac Clarke—the name, perhaps, an homage to science fiction pioneers Isaac Asimov and Arthur C. Clarke—receives a distress call from the stricken *Ishimura* and comes to investigate.

It's at this point Clarke enters into a dark and foreboding world, one filled with flickering lights, cramped metal hallways, and blood splatters. Something has torn huge chunks from the ship's hull, and Clarke will have to wear a gunmetal gray, brown, and black spacesuit complete with a neon-light health indicator on back as he navigates through what may be, if not hell, then its second cousin.

Inside *Ishimura*, players will get to experiment with weightless, zero-g jumps and navigation. In exposed areas of the ship, oxygen becomes a factor; canisters

"Trouble has come to the *USG Ishimura*..."



of O2 will resupply Clarke's air, but they're certainly not unlimited. Players, as Clarke, can also access telekinetic abilities linked to a device on the protagonist's arm. In this way, huge metal blocks can be inserted into receptacles to restore power, lights, and gravity to sections of Ishimura.

This stuff is just a warm up. The main event pits Clarke against Necromorphs, a hostile race of beings who've assaulted Ishimura and done terrible things to its crew. The Necromorphs are an adaptive race, and can take a variety of forms. Some creep along on four legs. Others walk bipedally, possessing razor-sharp talons. Still others are tentacled monstrosities, wall- and ceiling walkers, or hulking behemoths well inclined for, say, a boss fight.

Clarke is not a soldier, and his weapons will oftentimes be whatever he can pull from his surroundings. He'll have access to ore cutters, mine-shooting guns, and pulse rifles among others, and will have to be smart about how these weapons are used against foes. Necromorphs exhibit a great variation in body types, and can't just be killed by pumping enough ammunition into them. Instead, Clarke will have to attack their weak points, slicing off their appendages or strategically dismembering joints. Enemies will also display a great resiliency and capacity for trickery. Some will play dead and wait for an opportunity to strike. Others will appear immobilized, but then use what were their arms as legs to scuttle toward Clarke. Here, it seems *Dead Space* faces a quandary of sorts. Enemies with varying weak spots seems to be a neat gameplay feature, but frustration may set in for players if they're made to plunk away, guessing at an enemy's Achilles' Heel. *Dead Space*, at this stage of its development, seemed content to allow players to engage in copious amounts of guesswork.

Scripted sequences allow for terribly gory dismemberments. At one point in the game demonstration, after failing a quicktime event (the hated gameplay mechanic put forth by adventures such as *Shenmue* and its sequel), Clarke was torn limb from limb by an exceedingly brutish Necromorph. *Dead Space* also loads up its plate with gruesome scenes of dissection and spurting blood. Making space for this title might be a fine idea, but probably not for the faint of heart.





Step into the light so I can cut your face off.

The creepy Silent Hill series has taken a turn for the absurd. Much anticipated and heralding a new start for the Silent Hill series, Silent Hill Homecoming seems to be more of a misstep than a brilliant leap forward. The game has been handed to American developer The Collective (which has produced fine adventures in Buffy The Vampire Slayer and Indiana Jones and the Emperor's Tomb, after the release of the lackluster Silent Hill IV).

Now, a caveat: Silent Hill Homecoming is very much a work in progress. It may be unfair to level healthy amounts of criticism at something that is still in development, but the red flags raised at a recent Konami event were numerous.

The developers set up the game's plot by showing a cut-scene in which protagonist Alex Shepherd, a soldier home from war, meets up with his mother. The scene was so stilted and awkward in its presentation, it was as if it had been written by aliens with only a vague notion of humanity or the English language. The events of the conversation were made even more unintentionally funny by Alex's wardrobe. He'd been dismissed from the army, yet still thought to carry his radio and flashlight with him (both of which were conspicuously pinned to his chest). At once, Alex seemed like the paste-eating kid on the short bus, the one so addlebrained his mom needed to fasten his mittens to his coat.

Sadly, everything about the game seemed to be a throwback to earlier versions of Silent Hill. The main character moved clumsily. Combat, despite the developers' insistence that the fighting had been improved, seemed as jerky and stilted as ever. For Homecoming, players will now be able to disconnectedly flail around with light and heavy attacks on supernatural foes, and even be able to perform one-hit kill moves. They'll also be able to dodge attacks and counterattack off-balance foes. Here, The Collective suggest Alex is a bit more competent in terms of combat than other protagonists in the series, but stress that Homecoming is not a combat game, and its hero is more everyman than Superman.

This new Silent Hill embraces quick time events, which also does not bode well. At one point, it was necessary for the player to hammer on the Xbox 360 controller's B button to escape an enemy's grasp.

Time will tell if the developers can right this ship. As it stands now, Homecoming only had a creepy, non-interactive scene with Alex strapped to a gurney and pushed down a hallway as a selling point. "Where am I, man?" he asked as he rolled past a series of rooms in which unspeakable tortures were being performed.

It may have been hell, Alex. With luck, the same won't be able to be said of Silent Hill Homecoming.



"At once, Alex seemed like the paste-eating kid on the short bus, the one so addlebrained his mom needed to fasten his mittens to his coat."

“Civ” leaders are going places.



LEFT Guess what girls, he's single!

RIGHT Did you know decapitated heads don't float? Limbs do. Briefly.

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LEFT Cleopatra hits the local mall.

RIGHT Revved-up time scale and console interface for quicker portable play.



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Fable 2

The Return of Project Ego

words Greg Orlando

The action role-playing game Fable 2 begins with an idyllic scene of a little sparrow taking flight toward the mythical city of Albion. It's the kind of scene that might be used to introduce a movie from, say, Disney, with its contrast of a tiny bird swooping first across, then down into, the city. Cue the triumphant music, and the scene is complete. Welcome to Fable 2.

The bird drops a load on the game's protagonist. "I like poking fun at game conventions," Fable 2's creator Peter Molyneux says. Here, he's taking aim at cut-scenes in general; before the bird feces hits the game's lead character, it freezes in mid-air, and the game's camera focuses to show it close-up. Then, bam.

"Doing selfless acts means that a hero in the game will be loved and respected by the many people he encounters."

This is Molyneux's way of introducing players to the grand scheme of things. Players begin the game as a child, and a powerless one at that. The game's introductory missions sends players on a quest to find a magic box, and they'll have to accomplish said feat without the use of weapons, spells, or even a basic knowledge of fighting.

It's early May in San Francisco. Molyneux has crossed the pond from England and traveled to the West Coast to show off Fable 2 for the last time—until the Electronic Entertainment Expo in (E3) July, that is. Today, he is smiling.

Molyneux holds the grin for a while. "You've heard me blathering on about Fable 2 for a couple of years," he says.

"Finally, I can show you the game."

It has been a long time in coming. For the original Fable, Molyneux went on and on to anyone who would listen about the game's features. Molyneux' blue storm included suggestions of a world that changed as its protagonist did; if the hero planted a seed at the game's start, it would grow to be a huge tree by the game's end.

It was exciting stuff, but the grandiose promises weren't wholly kept. Fable was released without many of the features Molyneux had talked about and, despite the game's overall quality, there was a backlash among the fans who had eagerly swallowed a lot of hype.

For Fable 2, Molyneux' Lionhead Studios was bought by Microsoft. Microsoft then set its public relations flacks to the great task of managing what Molyneux could, and could not, say about his new game. As a result, Fable 2 emerged, piece by piece,



Fable 2 won't be shying away from
a little blood...

as the world's most slowly doled out features list. At one event, Molyneux was able to announce players in Fable 2 would be accompanied on their adventures by a dog. At another event, Molyneux spoke of the game's one-button combat system. And so on.

Today, however, the game is close to completion. It is now time for Molyneux to show Fable 2 not just as a list of interesting features, but as a game itself.

The game is, at its heart, about choices. This time around, the game's morality system has been expanded to include the notions of cruelty, kindness, and sacrifice. As Molyneux notes, cruelty itself is oftentimes a kindness; when he sends his young son to bed, Molyneux says he's being mean for the boy's well-being. Good and evil in the game have become more complicated notions here. This time around, being "good" in Fable doesn't strictly equate to helping people. Helping people, sometimes, is a bad thing to do.

Heroism involves sacrifice, Molyneux says. Doing selfless acts means that a hero in the game will be loved and respected by the many people he encounters. It will also mean going without; Heroes in Fable 2 will have to forego gold, experience, and power as they perform their charitable acts.

More to the point: Heroes may have to forego the love of their children. At one point in Fable 2, the protagonist is faced with a choice: He must either suffer a tremendous bout of torture or choose to deflect the torture onto a young woman. The torture will leave the victim horribly scarred, and these scars will not be removable. If the player's character endures this fate, the decision will live on his face for the rest of the game. "Your children," Molyneux says, for Fable 2 allows characters to marry and procreate, "will run away screaming."

This may be the famed game designer's magnum opus on the topic of good and evil.

"We've been doing this moral stuff for 10 years," Molyneux says.

As players are shaping their hero's morality, they'll also be able to customize his (or her, the game allows for female protagonists) fighting styles. A hero can expand upon the game's one-button fighting system by adding flourishes, blocks-and-parries, and rhythm-based attacks. In this way, a host of individual skills and specialties can be tacked on to turn a jack-of-all-trades into a powerful swordsman, fearsome gunslinger,



skilled magician, or any combination thereof.

Choices will also shape the game's world. Molyneux has made sure he fit in his acorn and the mighty oak—after a fashion, that is. Events that happen early in the game will have far-reaching consequences in the world of Fable 2. Albion can be shaped by the simplest of things; one introductory quest has players fetching arrest warrants. What the player does with these warrants reflects not only the protagonist, but also the world, Molyneux says. Hand them to the sheriff, and Albion's slums will, in the fullness of time, be transformed into a bustling trade district free from felonious behavior. Hand those same warrants to less virtuous individuals and the sheriff loses his job. With no bite whatsoever taken from crime, the slums will deteriorate even further.

This, then, really is the Project Ego Molyneux wanted to create all those years ago. And the story of you will unfold before year's end.



MadWorld

It's a mad, mad, mad, MadWorld

words Greg Orlando

Sega's *MadWorld* conjures up a simpler time, when cartoonish violence was firmly entrenched as a means of not only entertainment, but also education. Who, after all, could forget classic Warner Bros. cartoons such as "It's Hummer Time!," in which a cartoon cat was gruesomely punished every time his gambling habit got the best of him, or "Chow Hound," which taught each and every one of us not—under any circumstances—to be a gluttonous slob. Violence taught us, by god, and we learned.

With *MadWorld*, there may well be a lesson to be learned, but we'll be damned if anyone at Sega or development house Platinum Games thought to mention—or even hint at—exactly what that may be. Instead, the game may be exactly what it appears to be: an over-the-top bloodfest for the Nintendo Wii.

Rendered in stark black and white, and liberally decorated with plenty of blood, *MadWorld* is eminently stylish. It resembles almost no other game out there, although vague comparisons may be drawn, perhaps, to *Killer 7* or the cel-shaded *Shooter 13*. Some have likened the game to Frank Miller's starkly brutal comic book *Sin City*, and this comparison holds some weight. Indeed *MadWorld*'s liberal use of heavy black lines and effusive gouts of crimson are standard fare in Miller's *City*.

Platinum Games is not aiming for Miller's oftentimes mean-spirited violence, however. Instead, the developers meant for the violence to be cartoonish and so excessive as to be comical. In this, they may have succeeded mightily.

The game was recently shown at a Sega-held event in San Francisco. Fireworks were shot off in San Francisco Bay to celebrate Sega's collaboration with Platinum, and attendees got to see *MadWorld* in action, albeit all too briefly.

The protagonist, Jack, has a chain saw on his right arm. He wears goggles that rest on his forehead and a leather jacket with a skull on its back. Jack seems to exist in a game show of some sort, and his preferred method of discourse is violence.

Like the punishments issued to the poor, gambling-addicted cat in "Hummer Time," all of Jack's brutal actions have clever nicknames associated with them. Impaling someone on a spiked wall is "Rose Bush." "Heart Surgery" occurs when Jack reaches into an enemy's chest, pulls out his beating heart and crushes

it in his hands. Other delightfully egregious finishers include "Flat Tire," "Human Garbage," and "Stink Bomb."

Clearly, some thought has gone into these killing moves. One careless enemy walking too close to a waterway (and Jack) was stabbed through the head with a caution sign. After being stabbed, the man had a few stumbling steps to contemplate the need for caution before falling, one would imagine, dead into the water with a splash of white. During a minigame called a Bloodbath Challenge, Jack was tasked with walloping foes with a bat, knocking them into a spiked dartboard. This challenge, called "Man Darts," was narrated by what seemed to be a game show announcer.

MadWorld is the brainchild of Shigenori Nishikawa, who worked on *Dino Crisis* and *Resident Evil*. He's not as big a name as, say, Platinum's Shinji Mikami, but this seemed to matter very little in light of *MadWorld*'s bloody, and bloodily humorous, vision.

"Jack seems to exist in a game show of some sort, and his preferred method of discourse is violence."



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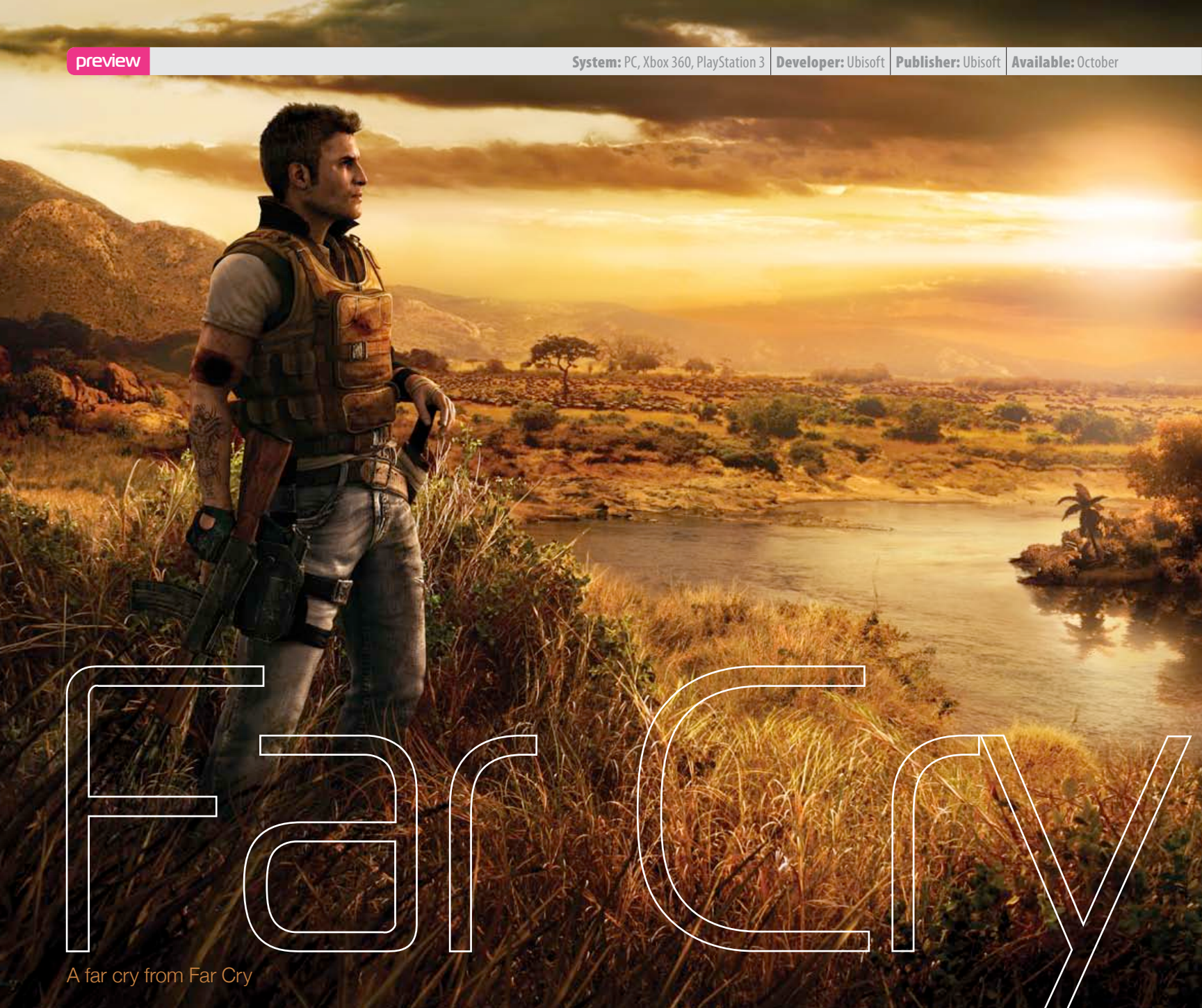
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A far cry from Far Cry

words Greg Orlando



The original Far Cry for the PC featured the bland protagonist Jack Carver, an imminently forgettable sort. It also featured mutants called the Trigen and spawned the console games Far Cry Instincts, Far Cry Instincts: Evolution, and Far Cry Instincts: Predator. Somewhere along the way, the first-person shooter series introduced a host of feral powers for its protagonist, and Carver was able to track enemies by scent trails, see in thermal vision, run and jump faster and farther than normal humans, regenerate health, and use powerful melee attacks.

For Far Cry 2, Carver has been given his pink slip. The Trigen have moved to the generic enemies' retirement home. The feral powers have had their day in the sun and now are being buried somewhere nice and cool. Developer Crytek, responsible for the original game (but not the

console versions), will not be returning for the sequel. In short, Far Cry 2 will be a far cry from its predecessor.

The game takes place in Africa, and Ubisoft has created a deadly playground that measures some 50 square kilometers. To set the stage, the developers visited Africa to get a feel for its vast deserts, sweeping savannas, teeming jungles, and waterways. Within the framework of this landscape, players are free to go where they will, exploring and blasting merrily away in the first-person perspective.

As a disease-stricken mercenary, players will have to stay alive, first and foremost. A mosquito has bitten the protagonist—players can choose one of a dozen or so mercenaries—and infected him with malaria. This dramatically affects the main character's health; he's dependent on health packs to survive. This dependency

"The game's Dunia engine (literally 'Earth' or 'world' in Swahili) provides the opportunity for players to scorch their surroundings, cut down trees with gunfire, and sneak across terrain by moonlight."



can be both a boon and bane to the hero. Take enough medicine and his general health will improve, boosting his strength and increasing his ability to sustain damage. Get cut off from the medicine and the hero will become sickly and grotesque, the kind of individual people will shun. It should be noted, of course, that this is Ubisoft's version of malaria. In the real world, malaria can be cured with drugs such as quinine sulfate and doxycyclines, which neither require nor cause dependence. The effects of treatment, or lack thereof, in the game are also fanciful. With medication, malaria can be cured; untreated, it can cause death.

Injuries are handled in a somewhat more realistic fashion. At times, the player will have to perform battlefield surgeries on himself, yanking out bullets from his body. It's reminiscent of the mechanic Electronic Arts had planned—and then removed—from its homoerotic third-person buddy shooter *Army of Two*, wherein one character would have had to staunch his partner's blood flow by stuffing tampons into his wounds. To Ubisoft's credit, they've stated that injuries of this type won't be overly commonplace; having to dig out bullets after every firefight would perhaps be the apex of tedious gameplay.

A reputation system will work hand in hand with the character's infirmity. Players will have to cozy up to two

warring factions in order to receive medication. A good relationship with the factions ensures not only access to medication, but also weaponry and a path to the game's main villain, the arms dealer named (not surprisingly) "The Jackal." Conversely, the more infamous a player becomes, the less potential he has for durability—and the lower the chances the game's nonplayer mercenaries will help him in combat.

Getting by with a little help from his friends makes good sense for any mercenary. Characters not chosen as the protagonist play roles in the game's story, sometimes aiding the player in the quest and, at other times, hindering it. Nonplayer allies will even go so far as to yank an injured hero from battle, carrying him to safety.

The developers have said that players are free to tackle *Far Cry 2* in any way they see fit. Missions can be accomplished with brute force or stealth. It will be possible to lay waste to villages with flamethrowers, snipe from long distance, or hack up enemies with machetes. The game's Dunia engine (literally "Earth" or "world" in Swahili) provides the opportunity for players to scorch their surroundings, cut down trees with gunfire, and sneak across terrain by moonlight. It's quite fitting, of course. A mercenary's life should always be dangerous, but certainly never constrained.



Prince of Persia

And Iran, again ...

words Greg Orlando

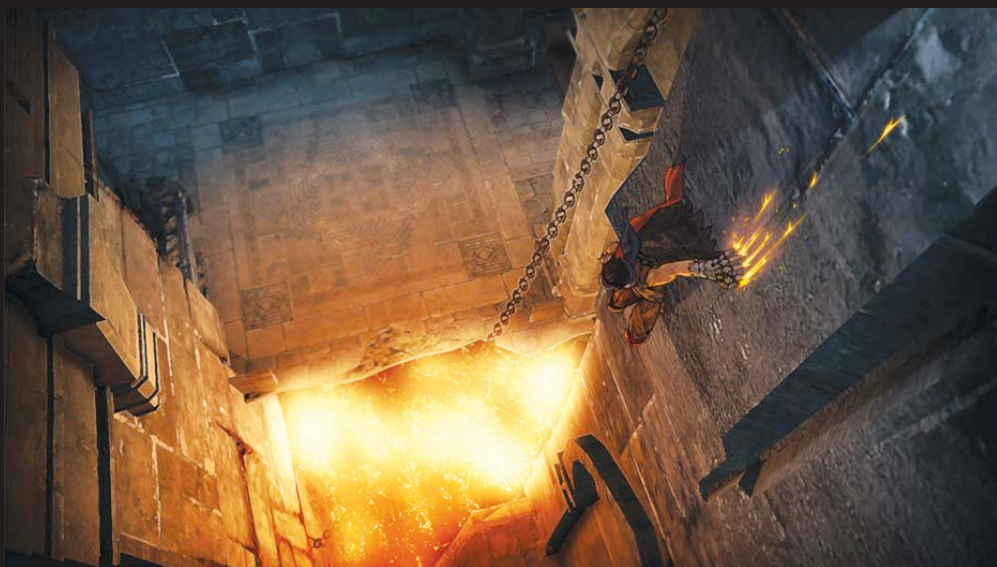
"My claim to you is that no one is ever going to be displeased by our support character." -Ben Mattes, producer

With luck, Ubisoft will put the final nail in the coffin of bad game design that is the artificial intelligence-controlled "ally"; The bumbling idiot who will walk into gunfire, whose hand needs to be held at every opportunity, and who's more useless than a mail-sorting giraffe.

"No one's ever done it right before," Ben Mattes, producer for Prince of Persia says. "My claim to you is that no one is ever going to be displeased by our support character; bold claims, I know. But you can quote me on it."

Mattes is referring to Elika, the Prince of Persia's new female ally. When the Prince leaps into combat, the barefoot Elika will be right beside him, providing aid in the form of a leaping attack followed by a tandem twirl in which she and the Prince jump into the air and hurl themselves downward. She's tightly integrated into gameplay, Mattes says, and will be able to perform tasks her male companion can't, such as dissipating an enemy's magical shields. In more sedate moments, Elika will point players in the right direction, providing them with hints as to where to go or what actions to perform.

This third-person adventure has no ties to previous Prince games. It is, Mattes says, a fresh start for the third-person adventure series, and has both a new Prince and a new story. In this vein, players can expect a world with lots of opportunities for exploration, a combat system where every fight is likened to combat against a boss (in terms of its close-up action and reliance on finding strategic advantages to exploit), and some new equipment for the protagonist in the form of a gauntlet to allow its wearer to slide down cliffs.



Killzone

Kill the Helghast

words Brady Fiechter

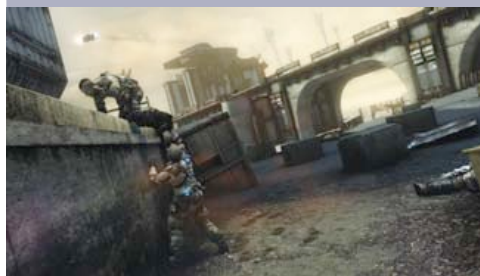
Clarification: Killzone was not that bad. Far better crafted and far more interesting first-person shooters were available at the time for PlayStation 2 and Xbox, but Killzone's world was strong enough and its fan base deep enough in the end to power the march into sequel territory. This is a good thing when you finally get your hands on Killzone 2.

Here we are, a few E3s and deceptive demos later and the clarification shall continue: Killzone 2 doesn't look *that* good. But now that I've actually experienced Killzone 2 in action, let's get past the "does it live up to the video" spew and focus on the clean slate of subjectivity: This game looks awfully impressive, so good in fact that you may be looking at a forthcoming benchmark in the genre.

The final visual judgment, as always, comes down to sticky subjectivity, which is where I'll now clarify that "awfully impressive" rises out of the immense level of detail you notice the moment you scan the war-torn setting. It's one of those games that will make people delightfully take notice when it's running in a game store, begging for your 60 bucks. Killzone 2 has no problem



"...the sensation of a dense, satisfying kill is immediately felt"



invoking the "wow" factor, yet a lingering disappointment left me wondering if what I saw—this shadowy introductory level looked like every other generic military war zone—would give way to more invention.

A big standout are the animation routines on the enemies, whose beefier designs look great collapsing to their death. When Sev—soldier guy, Alpha Team member—takes a breather to reload (even the pistol feels fantastically solid and powerful), the movement is exceptionally slick. And when it comes time to unload that new clip, the sensation of a dense, satisfying kill is immediately felt. I had a big problem with the original Killzone and its soft, labored combat; here the game feels vastly reworked.

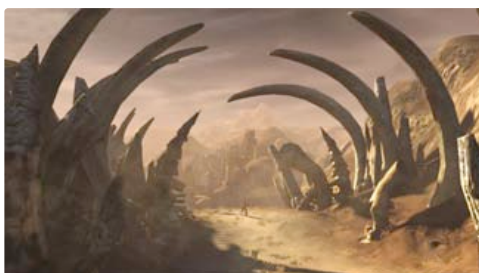
A cover scheme has been layered into the otherwise familiar FPS point-and-shoot mechanics. Nothing too complex: slide up against an acceptable object, peek, and shoot. Most of the action from the level on display draws you into the open; expectations are that this will not be some cat-and-mouse shooter. When the action did get a little rough, it's worth noting that Sev's teammates looked fairly intelligent aiding in the killing spree.



System: Xbox 360/PS3 | Developer: Secret Level | Publisher: Sega Available: September

Golden Axe: Beast Rider

Sega teased us with a little more Golden Axe: Beast Rider at their pre-E3 gamer's day late last month, and this is what senior producer Nigel Cook had to say for the latest update: "Golden Axe: Beast Rider is in full development and the beasts are the 'unofficial' stars of the game. "Mirigore" our ape like beast is my favorite. It's so much fun grappling the other beasts and ripping them apart. Forget the traditional block systems of old since Tyrus Flare can parry enemy attacks and counter them with a brutal strike. For those more powerful two-handed attacks, you can evade by rolling around the enemy and stabbing them in the back. Find what we call the 'sweet spot' in the combo and you are rewarded with a awesome cinematic kill move. Always brutal and very gory! Between kills, find those pesky gnomes to replenish your health and mana for magic. All in all it's a blast to mix and match beast combat, blade combat and magic at any time."



System: Wii | Developer: Konami | Publisher: Konami | Available: September

Lost in Blue: Shipwrecked!

Lost in Blue: Shipwrecked! isn't much to look at. Those Nintendo 64 style screen-shots aren't going to have you drooling. But Lost in Blue has never been about cutting-edge graphics. The games are known for their nerve-wracking, somewhat desperate emptiness. The DS titles are about children stuck on deserted islands, and the content of the game can be narrowed down to keep these kids alive for one more day. Constantly on the edge of starvation, forced to build weapons out of sticks and leaves, Lost in Blue succeeds because of the atmosphere it suggests. And, well, because the touch-screen worked perfectly for survival-themed mini-games. Rub sticks together, blow into the microphone; you've got a pretty decent virtual fire simulator.

The Wii edition of Lost in Blue will contain more than forty of these survival-games, each using the nunchuck and Wiimote to represent whatever stressful thing these poor kids are reduced to doing. Sadly, this LiB title looks a little more lighthearted than earlier entries, with dancing raccoons and animal sidekicks. Still, fishing, building, and making rafts are all going to be accomplished with gestures of the Wiimote, and more than one player can face off in versus versions of the mini-games. Choosing between a young boy or girl, players can pretend that they've just survived a cruise-ship crash and are eating sand-covered clams and gross, tiny fish ... before turning off their Wii and going to McDonalds.





System: PS3 (PSN) | **Developer:** Q Games | **Publisher:** SCE | **Available:** Summer

PixelJunk Eden

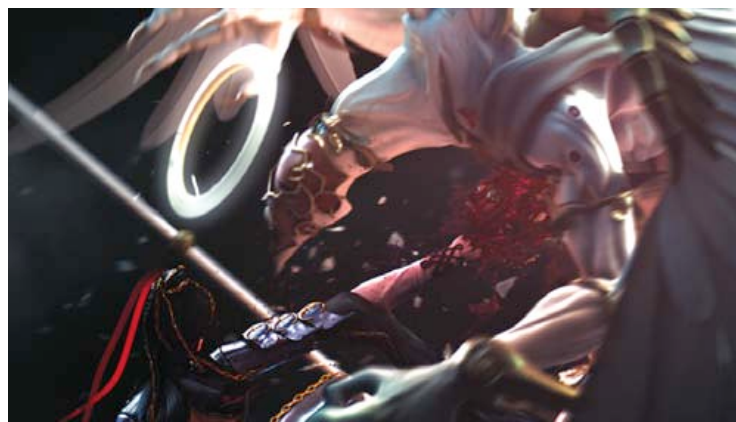
PixelJunk Eden is the next installment of the PixelJunk series, which means it has a heck of a lot to live up to. The game takes place in a spectacularly colorful garden of strange plantlife, which you must seed and navigate with your little creature known as a "grimp." These bug-like forms can cast a silky line and leap from growth to growth, tethered on simple grab points that connect the scene to its platforming roots. The goal is to kill... excuse me, the goal is to grow a garden that looks like it belongs in a museum of modern art. Little bits of pollen and special items must be captured to feed the growth and move to the next garden. Two other players can explore the same area with you as a team.



System: 360, PC | **Developer:** Deck13 | **Publisher:** dtp | **Available:** 2009

Venetica

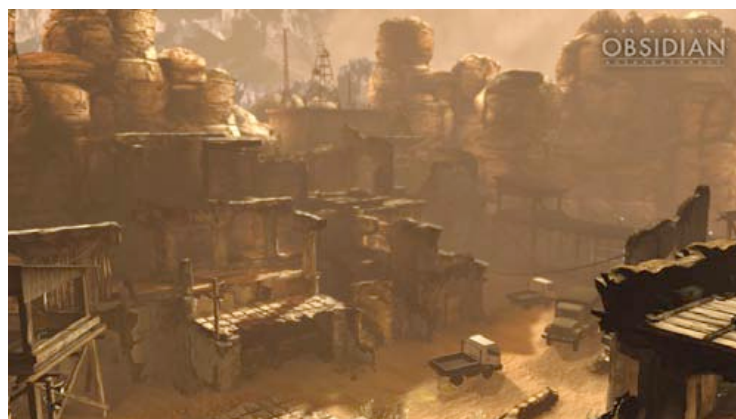
Venetica is a role-playing game being developed by the German studio Deck 13, who is very smart in realizing that the daughter of Death deserves her own title. Seeing as how this is the 16th century, there are curses and necromancers and such, all ready to put an end to daddy Death's existence. You won't allow that though, because you are kick-ass with a host of powers and not afraid to use them.



System: Ps3, 36 | **Developer:** Platinum Games | **Publisher:** Sega | **Available:** 2009

Bayonetta

Devil May Cry creator Hideki Kamiya claims it's time to get past his action series and others like it and embrace a new way of looking at the genre. He's not quite ready to show us too much of what he's getting at, but it's obviously gonna have guns and death. A good start for an action game. The main character was introduced as a female, who has guns attached to her feet, which will inevitably be aimed at places that explode.



System: PS3, 360 | **Developer:** Obsidian | **Publisher:** Sega | **Available:** 2009

Alpha Protocol

The developers of Knights of the Old Republic 2 are cooking up a little modern-day espionage action in the form of Alpha Protocol. The game tracks the character of Michael Thorton, who ain't so liked by his government anymore, and as we all know, former secret agents with secrets to hold means lots of action and shady business. You'll be given a freedom of choice with what you want to do with your deadly knowledge, as the world order hangs in the balance.

Little Big Planet

System: PS3 | **Developer:** Media Molecule | **Publisher:** SCE
Available: September



HAWX

System: PS3, 360, PC | **Developer:** Ubisoft Romania | **Publisher:** Ubisoft
Available: Fall



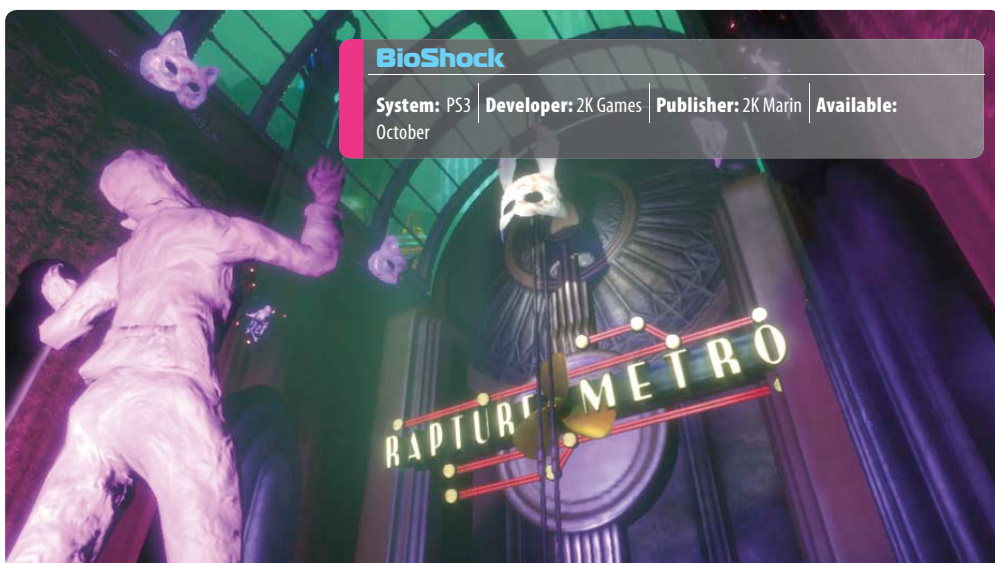
Sonic Unleashed

System: PS3, 360, Wii | **Developer:** Sonic Team | **Publisher:** Sega
Available: November



Motor Storm: Pacific Rim

System: PS3 | **Developer:** Evolution Studios | **Publisher:** SCE
Available: Fall



BioShock

System: PS3 | **Developer:** 2K Games | **Publisher:** 2K Marin | **Available:** October



Fallout 3

System: PS3, 360, PC | **Developer:** Bethesda | **Publisher:** Bethesda
Available: Fall

So Far, So Great

A seventh-generation introspective

words Dave Halverson

"Any PS3 or 360 games also available on Wii and/or PS2 should come with a warning label..."

With the first key transition in console gaming—the jump from 8- to 16-bit—the rule was pretty much more of the same, only better...way better. Games didn't change all that much in terms of basic structure (three buttons got the job done) but the ability to play near arcade-quality games at home was a mind-blowing proposition, followed by the advent of scaling and rotation and mode-7 3-D (well, pseudo 3-D) when the SNES came rolling into town. It wasn't until Nintendo EAD and Argonaut teamed up on *Star Fox* that home console got its first dose of polygonal 3-D, with a little help from the Super FX coprocessor.

It was the 32-bit consoles, though—along with the Nintendo 64—that moved the quest for arcade quality at home into the polygonal realm. Although the arcades still had the edge, original 3-D games began to take hold, marking the biggest leap in game design and development in the history of console gaming, along with the apex of side-scrolling games, which became the stuff of dreams—so utterly gorgeous that it was difficult to contain oneself. *Clockwork Knight*, *Astal*, *Guardian Heroes*, *Castlevania Symphony of the Night*, *Mischief Makers*, *Three Dirty Dwarves*...side-scrollers rocketed beyond the arcade quality mark. I didn't sleep a lot those days. Shame it didn't last. Who would have ever guessed that the same generation that perfected 2-D would also spell its end? The allure of 3-D gaming brought on a momentous shift, forever changing the face of gaming. In the generations since, 3-D has crept its way up the evolutionary ladder from blocky and crude characters with no fingers to the point where we can see pores in characters' skin. Console gaming became a part of our culture with the advent of the PS2 and Xbox, but has since moved to full-fledged, mass-consumer home entertainment by way of the Wii's casual gamer impetus and a pair of super-consoles that do it all and then some.

Xbox 360 Live, PSN, Virtual Console: Our new machines not only connect us with vast libraries of music and entertainment, they've become warehouses for our old games,

breeding grounds for independent games, virtual meeting places, and portals to online gaming universes. One small step for gaming, one giant leap for gaming kind: This is the best it's ever been.

My only concern is that while gaming has truly arrived, gaming retail has not. Limited space dictates that all games don't get equal treatment, and the lack of after-market space isn't conducive to today's larger budgets. Where can you go to buy a year-old game? There are aisles and aisles of DVDs dating back decades, but try to buy a game from 2006 and you're out of luck. But that's a topic for another day. For now, here's my personal take on the state of the seventh generation of gaming so far...

Crossing the streams: Is multi-console development the bane of the industry?

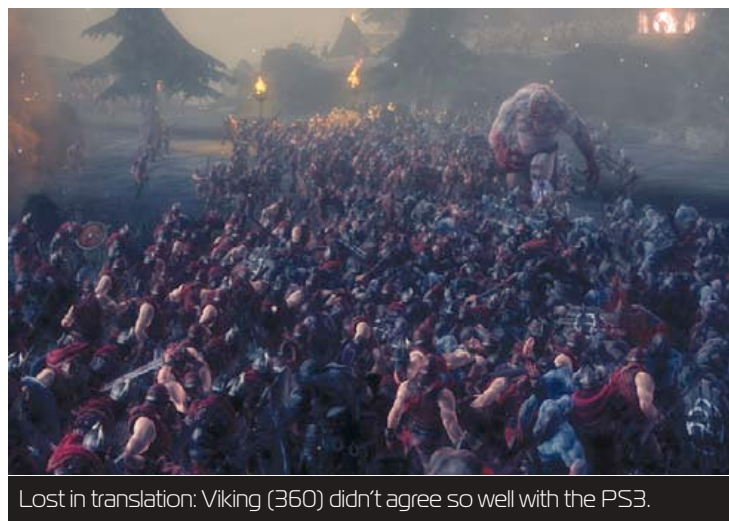
Any PS3 or 360 games also available on Wii and/or PS2 should come with a warning label, as they may be hazardous to your financial and mental health. If you're buying a res'd-up PS2 or Wii game for your new super-console, you're getting burned, unless the respective

versions were developed by separate developers or by that rare studio with the freedom, budget, and manpower to develop to each console's strengths. But even then, refurbished PS2 or Wii models on PS3 or 360 are no match for the real thing. Same goes for textures: All the normal mapping in the world can't make a last-gen game truly seventh generation. The best games for any given console are the system exclusives, followed by co-developed 360/PS3 games, not ports. 360 to PS3 ports are usually disastrous. Such awesome 360 games as *Condemned 2*, *Assassins Creed*, and *Viking: Battle for Asgard*—along with the majority of multi-platform franchise games—are poison on PS3. By the same token, you can't make a great PS3 game perform on 360 either, but that's currently not a problem.

As long as Microsoft holds on to the larger user base, the Xbox 360 will be the lead platform, meaning PS3 users won't be seeing anywhere near the potential their system is capable of outside of first-party games—and even then, it'll be years before it becomes both possible and feasible to tap into its full power. For the time being, co-developed games like *Dark Sector*, *Hellboy*, and *GTA IV* make the

best of both worlds by way of parallel development (rather than porting), but for the most part, PS3 users are still getting games designed for the Xbox 360. This is where new consumers need to be wary. To the uneducated new user, logic would dictate that all games would be superior on PS3, given the technology, but the game industry doesn't work that way. Aside from the obvious Blu-ray advantage—anyone that purchases a Blu-ray player in addition to a PS3 is nuts—the reason to go PS3 should be based on first-party and exclusive games, along with longevity. The PS3, for all intents and purposes, has eighth-generation technology tucked away. For that matter, the 360's dual cores offer similar strides in architecture, although not to the same degree.

Back on subject: For as long as I can remember, from the NES versus Master System days to present, first-party games



Lost in translation: *Viking* (360) didn't agree so well with the PS3.

have always driven brand loyalty. You can only play Gears of War, Halo 3, Viva Piñata, Kameo, Mass Effect, Crackdown, PGR, Fable 2, Blue Dragon, Lost Odyssey, Banjo-Kazooie, and Too Human on Xbox 360, but you can only play Motorstorm, Uncharted, Resistance, Ratchet & Clank Future, Gran Turismo, Heavenly Sword, God of War III, Little Big Planet, The Eye of Judgment, White Knight Story, Final Fantasy XIII, and Metal Gear Solid on PS3. So which is better? There's no right answer. There's no way that any longtime gamer could choose between them. We all have a Wii—we're required by law to purchase any system occupied by Link, Samus, and Mario—but not just the new Metal Gear or Final Fantasy? Miss out on Mistwalker RPGs, Rare games, and Gears of War? No way. You'd go mental. New users, however, will choose their first console based on a number of factors, from budget to social status. Sports fans will likely opt for a PS3 or 360, but families, females, and casual gamers are either hooked on or still waiting for the Wii...

The Wii factor

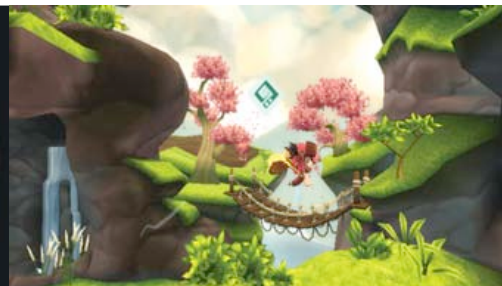
Gaming has never been *all* about graphics, although graphics have always been the barometer for innovation. For this round, Nintendo set out to break tradition by creating a lower-priced machine with an emphasis on casual-gamer appeal and control innovation over graphics technology. Not what I had in mind, but okay, I'll bite, and so did everyone else. And so far, so good, except for the fact that they seem to be selling their massive user base short. The Wiimote and nunchuck are great tools, but only when they're married to an exclusive Wii-only game—preferably a good one. By letting third parties dramatically strip down their Xbox 360 and PS3 games and simply retro-fit the controls for Wii, they're creating the Uwe Boll of gaming libraries. It's bad enough that the vast majority of Wii games aren't made for the Wii, but it's even worse that the current standard is on par with first-generation PS2.

What are all these "casual" gamers going to do when they're no longer casual? With the largest installed base as their bargaining chip, Nintendo should be demanding that third parties create Wii-exclusive versions of their games, designed to exemplify the Wii experience. Not only would the third parties sell more (way more) games, but Nintendo might return to the glory days of old when they ruled by the "only on Nintendo" brand. The proof is in the games made for the Wii: Zelda: Twilight Princess, Super Smash Bros. Brawl, Super Mario Galaxy, Battalion Wars II, No More Heroes, Death Jr: Root of Evil, Zack & Wiki, and other such system-exclusive awesomeness. And where's the second wave of first-party gold? How

many years will we be waiting for the next round? Give us a side-scrolling DKC 4 or any Metroid where we can ogle Samus. Enough with the FPS Metroid: It's not Metroid! I love the Wii when it beckons me, but that's happening less and less. And what about the ever burgeoning movie- and TV-based side of the industry? Talk about a quagmire...



Games like LostWinds are what the Wii was created for, so what's with all the retro-fitted rehash Nintendo?



Progress interrupted

What seemed like the ultimate marriage of entertainment and interactivity so many years ago on 8- and 16-bit quickly became a breeding ground for stinky games that forever sullied the industry and the films they were based on. Acclaim, Activision, THQ, Ocean, Viacom New Media and others had the cash to lock up the big licenses and the corporate greed and lack of vision to forgo quality in favor of profits based on suckering brand-loyal consumers. There were a few exceptions, such as Sega, Sunsoft, Virgin, Ocean (who played on both teams), and Konami, but they didn't produce near the volume of the third-party publishers that existed on licenses. The majority of gamers at the time didn't really care, though. Movie games (the best of which didn't even come close the triple-A stuff) were considered sellouts in an industry dominated by fresh new character-driven action games, arcade ports, RPGs, and all the sequels that came with them. There were a few bright spots, like Super Star Wars and GoldenEye, that proved movie games had a place in the world, but it took the industry the better part of a decade to realize that they were slowly killing the cash cow.

These days, movie- and TV- (and now anime-) licensed games are a huge part of the industry, driven by major publishers and, in some cases, top developers. Following an era that produced The Chronicles of Riddick, The Incredibles, The Nightmare Before Christmas, Enter the Matrix, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, The Lord of the Rings, Peter Jackson's King Kong, Knights of the Old Republic, and many other memorable tie-ins, this generation of consoles seemed poised to connect the last dot in the category coming full circle.

There's just one BIG problem: Major movie games are typically cross-platform, but the Wii doesn't fit into the current equation. Who would have ever dreamt that Nintendo would allow their über-mass-consumer console to become the dumping ground for blatantly inferior ports, especially given their master plan's obvious success? All these Wii ports are doing everybody a huge injustice, and movie tie-ins are the weakest link. The sorry state of a stripped-down 360/PS3 game like Iron Man or The Incredible Hulk running on the Wii is truly sad, especially taking into account how long most people waited to get one and how important movie and cartoon franchises are to kids and families: ground zero for Reggie town. What's worse is that the tables are often turned, leaving PS3 and 360 owners holding the bag with Wii/PS2 architecture (in higher resolution, where it's even uglier) and, if they're lucky, better textures, in place of a genuine seventh-generation game. After all of Nintendo's posturing, I never dreamt that they would forsake the very consumer they claim to care so much about, let alone screw up the industry in the process. Imagine how cool the Wii would

be with an "only on Wii" game library. We might be playing some insanely cool side-scrolling Transformers game instead of a watered-down version of a mediocre 3D game. Hulk, Spider-Man, Batman, X-Men, TMNT...imagine what Wii-dedicated development would mean to all the various TV and comic book movie tie-ins.

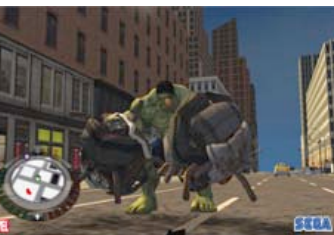
I've seen what the Wii tech can do beyond first-party games like Super Mario Galaxy and Super Smash Bros. Brawl, and it's a crime that Nintendo is allowing publishers to exploit consumers for short-term profits. I just don't see how this is going to serve anyone down the line, especially with so few system-exclusives in the offing. I hate to dump on the Wii—I really love it when it's on and it kills me to see Nintendo self-destructing—but the proof is in the games.

The good news is that most of the bona-fide seventh-generation movie and TV games (and even a multi-console

"Who would have ever dreamt that Nintendo would allow their über-mass-consumer console to become the dumping ground for blatantly inferior ports..."

adaptation or two) show great promise. Although we've yet to see a defining title akin to what The Chronicles of Riddick was to the last generation, Hellboy: The Science of Evil, Beowulf, Naruto: Rise of a Ninja, and The Bourne Ultimatum are all quality games, and Ghostbusters, Naruto: Ultimate Ninja Storm, Indiana Jones, and the game I predict might be that "Riddick" we've been waiting for, Afro Samurai, are all slated for this year. Kung Fu Panda is another shining example of seventh-generation movie gaming, although it's aimed at kids, and there have been a few bright spots in the cross-platform space with the 360 versions of Ratatouille and Wall-E. THQ and Heavy Iron are one of the few exceptions to the movie game rule. Home of all things Pixar, Heavy Iron has incredibly high standards. Ubisoft is another bright spot. Pairing Michel Ancel and Peter Jackson was visionary, and what they managed to do with TMNT inside of a year is commendable. I think that LucasArts is going to dazzle us with Star Wars: The Force Unleashed, as well. Still, the fact remains that as long as Nintendo maintains the largest installed base and their current low standards, the licensing side of the industry is going to be a strictly hit-and-miss proposition.

To this day the Wii—touted as more powerful than Xbox—has yet to produce a game anywhere near the visual quality of Conker: Live & Reloaded for Xbox, and there's a chance it never will. However, that hasn't stopped it from becoming the number one console in the land; a testament to the millions of gamers that remain brand loyal, almost to a fault. Personally, I'm still waiting for Nintendo to deliver on the promise of the hardware being between Xbox and Xbox 360. Or maybe I'm wrong and graphics really don't matter...Maybe we should have all held on to our Xboxes and PS2s...

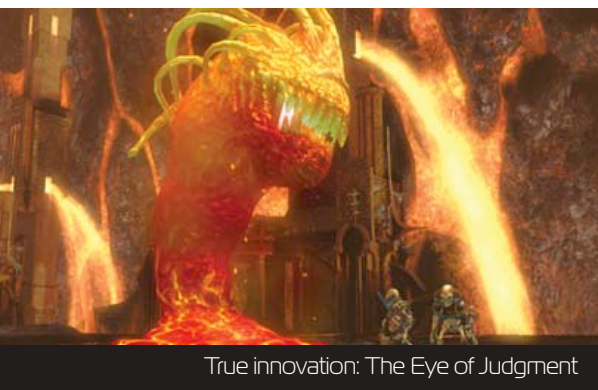


Wii port problem:

Wii users deserve games made to take advantage of the Wii's unique specs and proprietary control tech; not stripped down 360/PS3 games
Hulk Wii (top), & 360 (bottom)



Darksiders: Innovation through visual stimuli



True innovation: The Eye of Judgment

Graphics are everything

Are we truly into the next generation? Have games once again truly evolved? I guess that depends on what you read, but I believe they have, to a greater degree than ever before. Genre lines have now completely blurred. The platformer, FPS, action RPG, and action adventure are no more, replaced by hybrids that contain elements of them all. As games become bigger and more complex, what is it that really drives change? I believe that the answer is unequivocally graphics, because graphics define gameplay.

People generally consider graphics superficial; the appearance of a game's exterior, which is accurate, but also incomplete. The evolution that's struggling to take place is the shift from the blatantly artificial to the hyper-real, whether it be within a creature- or human-based infrastructure. On the outside, complex models with realistic layers of clothing and facial features are obvious, along with practical water effects and normal mapping that bring textures to life. However, the more realistic things get, the more art dictates quality and the more the subtle inaccuracies stick out. Dynamic collision, for instance, was hard to come by in previous years, but within today's HD worlds, its absence sticks out like a mustache on the Mona Lisa. Uncharted, Kameo, Viking: Battle for Asgard, Assassins Creed, Tomb Raider: Legend, GTA IV, Halo 3, and Gears of War are all great examples of how to marry characters with their environment. They feature player models (both main and in some cases even ancillary) with sufficient articulation to change cadence and animation when coming to rest on or negotiating slopes and stairs. If what meets the eye is drop-dead gorgeous but limited in terms of animation and expression, the result is more artificial than if the architecture (exterior) were crude. The same rule applies to terrain: Clothes that appear wet emerging from water or footprints that produce residual particles make the elements come to life, just as real-time terrain deformation helped Motorstorm become the new benchmark in off-road racing. All of these visual refinements are what's elevating videogames to an entirely new level, in concert with advanced physics and AI (which are also manifested as graphics) and, when they get it right, the double-edged sword that is realistic human face modeling and animation. When it's not perfect, the results can be downright creepy, but in the instance they do get it right, the results can be one of the most powerful means of elevating the gaming experience. Currently

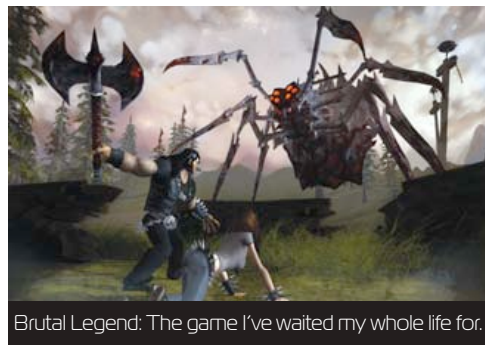
"People generally consider graphics superficial; the appearance of a game's exterior, which is accurate, but also incomplete."

Kojima Productions, Epic Games, Team Ninja, Naughty Dog, Square Enix and Ninja Theory (with an assist by Weta) have achieved greatness, with the pinnacle being Heavenly Sword, which defined how dramatic an effect expression, acting, and writing can have on a game when they are made as high a priority as any other key facet of the overall production.

At its best, current technology has elevated games to interactive cartoons and cinema, only many times longer and user-directed. That's the dream. At its worst, however, it's become a shiny coating for otherwise subpar content. The men are truly being separated from the boys here. It's time to get to know game directors, producers, artists, animators, designers, and musicians like we know those of film. It's also time to start reviewing these complex and expensive productions for what they are and whom they are created for, so that great games, beyond those suckling the predetermined "blockbuster" teat, can find their way home through the quagmire of an ever incoherent industry. Technology is manifested as graphics—what you see and feel through the controller. Gameplay is easy. Everyone knows what we like. There's no mystery left. It's all about how epic you can make it now. What about innovation, you ask?

Innovation is everywhere

If I had a nickel for every time I've read or heard someone yap about gaming needing true innovation, I could be filling up with super unleaded. But does anyone really know what that even means? In media and music, digital delivery is certainly innovative, so doesn't the same apply to games? True "innovation" (the act of innovating; introduction of new things or methods) is all around us. In terms of hardware, the Wii has the edge, although it's really just an airborne mouse and joystick. Few games use it in a manner I'd call innovative. Zack & Wiki and Wii Sports come to mind, although Wii Sports is pure novelty with next to no gameplay; a heavy price to pay for the ability to flick your wrist. The Wiimote and nunchuk are best when they're used to enhance traditional gameplay, like in No More Heroes. I'll give controller innovation to Nintendo, but in terms of gameplay (which I'm pretty sure is what people are referring to), The Eye of Judgment is not only the most innovative game I've played, but it's based on a hobby that serves millions of rabid fans and is supported by micro-transaction expansions that, if it succeeds, would never cease. In other words: truly innovative, with a massive base including a ton of people (like me) who've always wondered what compels someone to spend their weekend at a folding table in a comic



Brutal Legend: The game I've waited my whole life for.



Assassin's Creed: Welcome to the 7th generation.

book store. It's also beautifully made in every respect and infinitely enjoyable with the family...but it tanked out of the gate. I thought it would sell systems and start a revolution. Not even one similar game has been announced. Imagine what The Eye could do with many a comic book, movie, or game franchise.

Next up on the list of innovation is Little Big Planet. Not only is it completely innovative, but just look at it. A communal online platformer we get to mold? If this doesn't hit, I don't ever want to hear the word "innovation" again. I don't know about you, but I'm counting the days...I'll be looking for a way to order a puppet of my Sackboy, too. Sony is clearly leading the way in gameplay innovation, so why isn't the PS3 outselling the Wii if that's what everyone wants? They have the SixAxis pad, Home starts beta-testing soon, and you can even buy a two-handed controller. Don't forget about the Blu-ray player and the cell processors, either. Is it the hundred-dollar price difference? Negative; its longevity and multimedia features make it the cheapest console over the long haul by far, and has anyone seen a Wii for under \$200? Wii's not even HD, which happens to be the biggest innovation in home entertainment since color TV. So much for innovation. Innovation is driven by technology, which drives graphics, which drive gameplay. Even those \$10 downloads rely on graphics. Anyone played Lost Winds? That's innovation—but it's driven by the graphics—that wonderful Wiimote technology tethered to a stunning visual.

Would anyone want Castle Crashers or Bionic Commando Rearmed if they didn't look shiny and new? Nope. I rest my case.

What do I want?

Aside from Brutal Legend, which I dream about 24/7, I want true seventh-generation side-scrolling. I love the downloads and the DS Castlevanias, but games like Odin Sphere and LostWinds make me believe now more than ever that it's time to re-introduce side-scrolling. Imagining what a dedicated 360 or PS3 side scroller might look and play like keeps me awake at night. Sonic Unleashed will give us a taste. I hope it's not the last.

I also want seventh-generation arcade shooters like Darius, but I want world peace, too. Certain things are out of reach. Most of all I want Nintendo to start acting like Nintendo again, but for the most part, I'm having the time of my life. Someone definitely needs to make a Witchblade game based on the anime, and I'd really love to see Microsoft free Voodoo Vince. The game sold 240,000 with no support, and we fans want more, but Microsoft isn't going to let any critters loose with so much riding

on the Rare acquisition. They need to make it feasible for a publisher to step in so we can get Beep back and get back to making Voodoo Vince a household name.

Seventh generation pet peeves

Polygonal people: They've been butchered for years in pre-rendered cinemas. Now that we have the tech to do them in engine, it's become clear that the game industry has a throbbing Achilles heel. Do it right or don't do it at all. These celebrity puppet people are creeping me out.

Extraneous online functionality: We need another death-match mode like we need a Batman: Dark Tomorrow sequel. Save your time and money to make your core game better and more replayable. I'd rather hang on to my weapons and stats and play through with a new (female) character that can unlock a new area or two than shoot stuff in some crappy map. Enough already. Online gaming is doing just fine.

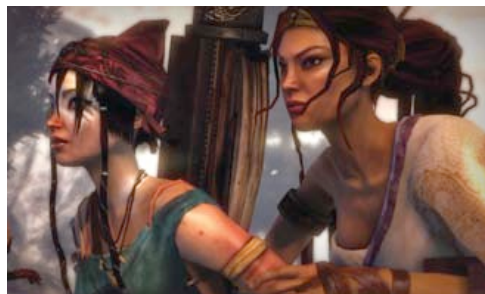
Modern warfare: How many franchises do we need? Can't we agree on two or three and call it a day?

First-person games without bodies: It's bad enough that I can't see my character. At least give me legs and feet. I mean, you have the tech. I cannot and will not float up another ladder or play through a game as two floating arms.

Bring back the music: What's with all the silence? Music is what drives emotion and builds suspense. Where have all the great soundtracks gone?

More sex, please: It's been implied in God of War and GTA IV, and we saw plenty of boobs in Conan, but when are video games going to really grow up? Why does M only stand for gore, violence, and cursing? I'm not talking porn—that's disgusting—but tasteful sex scenes that create a bond between characters, you know, like real life, or the movies. Enough of the gratuitous crap; we're all grown-ups here.

My personal most underrated, underappreciated, or altogether misunderstood seventh-generation games so far...



And the Oscar goes to...Heavenly Sword

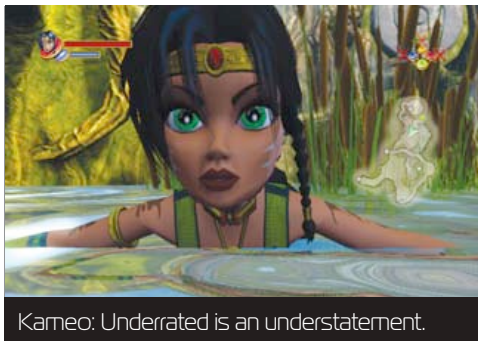
A union of exquisite beauty, brilliant combat, and masterful "Aftertouch" married to the best cinematics, writing, and acting in videogame history, along with a pair of female specimens so stunningly designed, modeled, and animated they literally seem alive.

Kameo (360)

It's one of the best platforming epics ever made—if not the best. The Elements of Power create an endless stream of gameplay diversity, which Rare incorporates as only they can, and Kameo herself is a pure joy to control. The hub of the game alone—on which the massive ogre battle takes place—is like nothing before it or since, and the amount of content to unlock the game's full potential is staggering. It's also one of the most beautiful and finely detailed games ever created.

Dark Sector (360, PS3)

Plagued by comparisons to Gears of War for its duck and



Kameo: Underrated is an understatement.

cover (as if duck and cover hasn't been rampant for a decade), people missed the true heart of the game, found in the amazing evolution of the Glaive, along with stunning architecture, creature, and mecha design, and some of the most entertaining and ominous mid-level and end bosses so far this generation.

Overlord: Raising Hell (PS3)

The PS3 version isn't underrated yet, but it will be. It may begin as good, but it builds to brilliant. I haven't experienced this level of progression in many years. The game gets better and better in every way as you progress, introducing new lands, weapons, choices, and techniques for the duration. It's also one of a kind. This is how fantasy is done.

The Eye of Judgment (PS3)

True innovation bringing card-based battles to life before your very eyes, along with completely addictive gameplay, stunning creature and character models, multiple races, and endless playability through new decks and expansions. How did this not work?

Folklore (PS3)

Totally unique gameplay tethered to a story line mixing otherworldly fantasy with real-world mystery, plus two playable story lines and fantasy visuals that define the PS3 experience.

Viking: Battle for Asgard (360 version only)

A sprawling, nomadic, open-world Viking fantasy epic set among a maze of beautifully laid topography with pristine lead-character animation, brutal combat, lots of vertical gameplay, insane creature models, and real-time open warfare amid thousands of warriors...oh, and dragons.

Assassins Creed (360)

So I hear it's a one-trick pony...and every open-world game up until GTA IV wasn't? You wanted Altair to jump onto a vehicle? What about the freedom to play the game in so many different ways, the sheer mind-blowingness of the ancient cities, the climbing, and the staggering amount of content attached to the missions? And this was the first one!

Crash of the Titans (Wii, 360)

Here's a game that's gorgeous on Wii and 360, endlessly creative and 100% FUN. Crash is back! Radical Entertainment has returned the franchise to its former glory and then some, by reinventing it from the ground up in all the right places.

The Legend of Spyro The Eternal Night (Wii)

The best Spyro game to date and one of the top five third-party Wii games somehow slipped through the cracks, thanks to a bunch of reviews from the usual haters.

Monster Madness: Grave Danger (PS3)

I doubt that Grave Danger is on anyone's radar, and I'm almost positive that it will be completely misunderstood by the press. That doesn't mean that it isn't the best 39 bucks

you could ever spend, either for your kids or yourself. My 7-year-old has played through on every skill level, amassed every weapon and upgrade, and unlocked every costume and extra...and he's still playing. So am I.

...And my most overrated:

(See opposite page for mass confusion)

Call of Duty 4

It is a beautiful game (provided you find war an attractive setting) and I do understand why people who like to fire guns at other people love it so, but I can't stand scripted time-sensitive gameplay. It counteracts exploration and freedom. It's also devoid of torso, legs and feet and lacks the character articulation found in games like Halo 3.

The Orange Box

Portal is neat I guess, if you're bored, but short, and Half Life 2 (like Half Life) is an outdated game. Outdated graphics and flawed, antiquated FPS gameplay—sloppy jumping, carrying items with invisible arms, no hands on the steering wheel...It was cool 10 years ago for PC (I hear) but it doesn't measure up to even mediocre seventh-generation first-person games.

Wii Sports

Appalling graphics and gameplay so limited it's almost nonexistent...Is swinging your arm that cool? It looks and plays like it was made in a week. And I'm sure a lot of games I haven't played.

For the record: The most underrated game of all time is still Oddworld: Stranger's Wrath. Hey there, Lorne, wherever you are.

10 Most Wanted

Brutal Legend
Tomb Raider Underworld
Fable 2
Mirror's Edge
Sonic Unleashed
Afro Samurai
Little Big Planet
Gears of War 2
Golden Axe Beast Rider
Darksiders



One game to rule them all?

Which game is the most seventh-generation of them all? I think it depends on what you're looking for. The deepest, most content rich seventh-generation game is GTA IV. The most impressive technologically is Assassins Creed. The game most indicative of advancements in authenticity and emotion is Heavenly Sword.

The most impressive overall visually is a tough one: Gears of War, Uncharted, Motorstorm, Ninja Gaiden II, Ratchet & Clank: Tools of Destruction, Kameo, and Bioshock must all be considered. The most innovative would be The Eye of Judgment or Little Big Planet. The battles in Viking: Battle for Asgard, Kingdom Under Fire: Circle of Doom, and Ninety-Nine Nights are also indicative of how powerful these consoles are.

If I had to pick one game, though, for the sole purpose of demonstrating the power of this generation, I'd choose Assassins Creed...or Uncharted. Maybe Heavenly Sword... I need to play Metal Gear Solid 4!



Second Opinion

Play Editors' Over/Under

Brady Fiechter

Editor in Chief

Overrated

Halo 3
Mass Effect
Devil May Cry 4
GTA IV
Crackdown

Underrated/Overlooked

Pac-Man: Championship Edition
Mario Strikers Charged
PixelJunk Monsters
Metroid Prime 3: Corruption
The Darkness

Favorites

The OrangeBox
BioShock
Call of Duty 4
Legend of Zelda: TP
Dead Rising

Mike Griffin

PC Editor

Overrated

GTA IV
Gran Turismo 5 (damage would've been nice)
Madden 08 PS3
GRAW 2 PC
Assassin's Creed

Underrated/Overlooked

Call of Juarez
S.t.a.l.k.e.r.
Prey
Dark Messiah
Quake IV (rancid 360 port)

Favorites

The Orange Box
BioShock
CoD 4
GTA IV
PixelJunk Monsters

Heather Campbell

Senior Editor

Overrated

BioShock
Assassin's Creed
Mario Kart Wii
Guitar Hero 3
Wii Sports

Underrated/Overlooked

No More Heroes
Naruto: Rise of a Ninja
The Orange Box (outside of critics)
Pac-Man: Championship Edition
Uncharted: Drake's Fortune

Favorites

No More Heroes
Halo 3
GTA IV
Naruto: Rise of a Ninja
Gears of War

Greg Orlando

Executive Editor

Overrated

Halo 3
Mass Effect
Wii Sports
Assassin's Creed
Warhawk

Underrated/Overlooked

Marvel Ultimate Alliance
The Godfather
Lego Star Wars: The Complete Adventure
Cars
Sega Superstars Tennis

Favorites

Dead Rising
BioShock
Viva Piñata
Super Mario Galaxy
Advance Wars: Days of Ruin

Casey Loe

Associate Editor

Overrated

Halo 3
Guitar Hero 3
Virtua Fighter 5
Call of Duty 4
Super Paper Mario

Underrated/Overlooked

Uncharted: Drake's Fortune
Lost Odyssey
Lair
Metroid Prime 3: Corruption
Blue Dragon

Favorites

BioShock
Uncharted: Drake's Fortune
Legend of Zelda: TP
Lost Odyssey
Ryu ga Gotoku: Kenzan

Nick Des Barres

Japan Editor

Overrated

Halo 3
Wii Sports
Call of Duty 4
GTA IV
Super Mario Galaxy

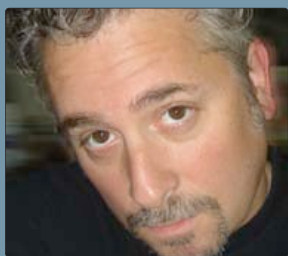
Underrated/Overlooked

Folklore
Lost Odyssey
Blue Dragon
Uncharted
Zack & Wiki

Favorites

Metal Gear Solid 4
Ryu ga Gotoku: Kenzan!
Uncharted: Drake's Fortune
BioShock
Lost Odyssey

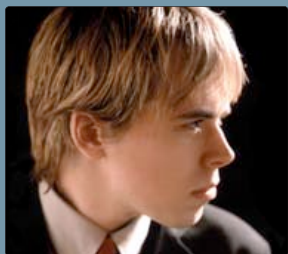
play
Staff "Round-up"



Dave Halverson
Publisher

Favorite genres: Platformers, adventure, 2D action, racing, sandbox, rhythm
Now playing: LostWinds, Overlord: Raising Hell, Ninja Gaiden II, The World Ends With You
Are most games too long? Depends on the game and genre of course. I like my Adventures and RPGs long (20-50) but pure action or shooting, 5-10 is cool.

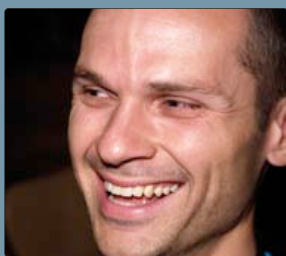
I'm feeling pretty pissed off about the state of movie reviews these days. How uptight do you have to be to not be thoroughly entertained by the likes of Speed Racer and Indiana Jones and the Crystal Skull? I thought game reviews were fugged up...Has the entire world gone mad? Hey, anyone reading this, do check out Overlord: Raising Hell if you have a PS3. Damn good fun that lasts a loooong time.



Nick Des Barres
Senior Editor

Favorite genres: RPGs, Action, Fighting
Now playing: Metal Gear Solid IV, GTAV
Are most games too long? Yes and no, though trends toward short campaigns (Gears, Halo 3, Heavenly Sword) are disturbing.

Nick fondly remembers the first video game he ever played: Trojan, by Capcom, on the NES. He wishes he could claim even earlier gaming-roots, and the modern-day Nick would probably be affronted by the reference to "Trojan" and insist it be called "Tatakai No Banka (Elegy For Battle)", but the fact remains that he's been playing games daily for nearly twenty years and writing about them for twelve. He tends to gravitate towards the classic genres of his youth: RPGs, action/adventure, shooting.



Brady Fiechter
Editor in Chief

Favorite genres: Adventure, first-person shooters, action, RPGs
Now playing: Mario Kart Wii, Lost Winds, Order Up
Are most games too long? Yes and no. Right now, yes!

Under constant pressure by a friend to flee the country and study the ways of the Taoist, Brady continues to balk, proclaiming that his spiritual journey lies in movies and games. He finds joyful satisfaction in killing things, namely zombies and soldiers and evil creatures, which tend to pop up in some of his favorite genres.



Casey Loe
Associate Editor

Favorite genres: RPGs, action, hummingbird simulators
Now playing: Ninja Gaiden II
Are most games too long? Length wasn't an issue when there were only a handful of great games each year.

Casey had a promising future as a video game journalist a decade ago, but booze, pills, and his all-consuming hatred of Final Fantasy VIII ultimately left him incomprehensible and unemployable. After spending eight years on the street ranting about Squall Leonhart to winos, schizophrenics, and syphilitic prostitutes, Casey has tricked an old friend into paying him to complain about video games in a national video game magazine.



Greg Orlando
Senior Editor

Favorite genres: RPGs, action, adventure, fighting, wrestling
Now playing: Civilization: Revolution
Are most games too long? Yes. And no.

Of Greg Orlando, historians agree that he is, without question, the finest human being to be mentioned in this sentence. A veteran of the Cola Wars thrice decorated, Orlando understands the universe's great solitary truth: If the mule don't kick, you know the mule don't ride. He is currently missing, presumed pantsless...



Eric Patterson
Contributing Editor

Favorite genres: Survival Horror, puzzle, music + Bemani, 2D SNK fighters
Now playing: Star Soldier R, GTAV
Are most games too long? Most RPGs, certainly.

Eric's reason for over two decades of video gaming is simple: so far, real life has yet to provide him access to zombies, quiet resort towns overrun with demons, ghosts you can trap with a camera, or, you know, a flesh and blood Jill Valentine or Ashley Graham. Mind getting on that, real life?



Mike Griffin
PC Editor

Favorite genres: MMORPGs, first-person shooters, action-adventure
Now playing: Mass Effect PC
Are most games too long? The best games are only as long as they need to be.

Even as a wee lad playing Zaxxon on Coleco, the technology and artistry of game design has always fascinated Mike. He thinks some games are timeless in that respect, whether 2D, 3D, flat-shaded or bump mapped. Mike's goal is to equip the readers with accurate information, so that limited funds and time can be put to good use.



Heather Campbell
Associate Editor

Favorite genres: Fighting, RPGs, Action, Etc.
Now playing: Street Fighter IV (arcade)
Are most games too long? Yes, most games are too long. You could beat Megaman 2 in a single sitting.

Heather's favorite game would be a hybrid of Street Fighter III and MMORPG level grinding. If someone would craft a title that was endless hours of fighting the same enemies, using classic Capcom button combos, then her death in front of the arcade cabinet would become the stuff of urban legend. Heathers been playing since Aztec Adventure, and still has nightmares about Missile Defence 3-D.



Metal Gear Solid 4
pg.056

The play rating system

We leave you with the parting shot.



Mike Hobbs
Art Director

Favorite genres: Action, racing, adventure, alternative, shooters
Now playing: Mario Kart Wii, Star Soldier R
Are most games too long? Yes. But most games are also bad!

A gamer since Space Invaders, Michael has a soft spot for 2D shooters and other games that directly engage the player. Nintendo certainly ranks high on his list of ideal developers. He's also recently become addicted to RC sailplane flying, so you'll actually find him outside now, absorbing the sun's photons.

Reviews

July 2008



LostWinds

The promise fulfilled

words Dave Halverson

I don't mean to beat my own drum—well, okay, maybe a little—but *LostWinds* is a perfect example of the kind of game I've been harping about since the Wii became the dumping ground for watered-down conversions. A 1,000 Wii-point download (\$10) from the Wii Shop and it's the best game I've played on Wii outside of *Super Mario Galaxy*.

LostWinds delivers on the early promise that the Wii would offer superior innovative games created in less time and for less investment than the competition. So far, *LostWinds* is the first game to deliver on the promise, and Nintendo had nothing to do with it. *LostWinds* is a product of Cambridge-based Frontier Developments, home to established but off-the-beaten-path franchises such as *The Outsider*, *Thrillville*, and *Roller Coaster Tycoon*. *LostWinds* was developed by a small team within the 160-strong company, based on an idea fostered from the companies "Game of the Week" forum, where staffers submit ideas and see where they lead. The game began as a four-man project

and wrapped 16 strong, a miniscule effort to say the least. Miniscule in size that is, but gargantuan in quality and scope.

The game is based on the principle that the nunchuk runs little Toku along, while the Wiimote (inhabited by Enril the wind spirit) creates wind gusts to propel him upwards, attack, and interact with the game's toy-box-like levels. Over time, Toku develops the ability to use Slipstreams and vortices to glide on saplings or manipulate airborne elements such as rocks, Ocarina-like orbs, and the game's dark energy, called Glorbs (physical incarnations of the game's antagonist, Balasar). Glorbs appear as small black globs of goop, although they can cleverly disguise themselves by adhering to objects in the environment, such as leaves, to appear as birds or piles of stone. Where other Wii games use the Wiimote to control the physical game, in *LostWinds* it controls the environments. Planting a seed and sweeping water over it from a nearby stream will cause it to grow and become an element of the game, just as fire can be kindled and swept into gusts drawn by the Wiimote to burn impassible woodland barriers. The end product is extraordinary: guiding Toku with your left hand and acting like mother nature with your right is like nothing

"the game's Zen-like state of mind is akin to the feeling you get playing *Ico*."



you've ever played. Ring any bells? The story and characters are also magical, and the game's Zen-like state of mind is akin to the feeling you get playing *Ico*.

One of the best—if not *the* best—games of the year thus far is a downloadable side-scroller on a console that appears inferior otherwise. This is the power of great ideas at work. The PS3 and 360 can't do this. Will Nintendo or the many third parties shortchanging the current user base take heed? Only time will tell.

parting
shot



I am in complete awe of a non-1st-party Wii for the first time. More games like this would make it the revolutionary console it was born to be. Visuals and story that transport the player meet gameplay that's unlike anything you have ever experienced... for \$10. I guess dreams really do come true, at least this once.

Metal Gear Solid 4

Guns of the Patriots

It all comes down to this.

words Nick Des Barres

Briefing

In 1967, the great critic Kenneth Tynan wrote in The Times of London, describing The Beatles' Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club band as "a decisive moment in the history of Western civilization." The comment showed a remarkable prescience: 40 years later, Sgt. Pepper's is widely hailed as the best album of all time. If video games ever prove to have a similar shelf life, Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots will be considered a decisive moment in the history of interactive entertainment... or, at the very least, the turning point of Hideo Kojima's career.

I am thoroughly relieved that play has left the hoary trope of numerical scores by the wayside, for it would be beyond my abilities to assign a number to MGS4. There exist no criteria against which I can rightfully judge the game and keep a clear conscience. In any event, my review would be hopelessly skewed; I have worshipped at the altar of Kojima since a transformative experience with Snatcher in 1993. I have a fastidiously maintained Kojima shrine that includes such ephemera as Yume Tairiku Adventure for MSX and special editions of MGS that were given to Konami shareholders. I mounted an unsuccessful



"MGS4 is the best game in the series, the best game Hideo Kojima has ever made, and also the best game yet to be released on 'next-gen' platforms."

“Although it hasn’t been advertised as such, MGS4 sports a gameplay overhaul just as significant as Resident Evil 4’s famous ‘full model change.’”

campaign in my youth to get hired at Kojima Productions. Perhaps most damningly, I thought MGS2 was a post-modern, metafictional masterpiece.

I admit that I have a bias, but I also like to think my appreciation of Kojima’s work puts me in a position to make a few blanket statements: MGS4 is the best game in the series, the best game Kojima has ever made, and also the best game yet to be released on “next-gen” platforms. This is all you really need to know. The marketing campaign for MGS4 has been very particular about what details were to be revealed; it is not my place to break it, but in the interest of writing a proper review I will have to do so. With that said, I will produce no story spoilers, but you may expect to learn a lot about the game’s content, structure, and length. Proceed with caution.

The Mission

One’s first impression of MGS4 is money. Leaving the game in attract mode allows you to see incredibly high-end, live action video facsimiles of television programs and commercials from MGS4’s future world, based upon the game’s central conceit of Blackwater-esque Private Military Companies: war as business, slickly advertised with brushed-metal CG sheen as might be an SUV or carbonated beverage today. I wouldn’t be surprised to learn that these clips, by Logan, the advertising agency behind the impressive currently-running iTunes commercial with Coldplay, cost more than most games do in their entirety. The videos set a fine tone for the game proper—we just aren’t used to seeing games from Japan, or perhaps anywhere, that are as confidently glossy as MGS4. This sleekness isn’t simple artistic prowess—although such prowess is, clearly, abundant—it’s cold, hard cash. Just as you can instantly tell Iron Man apart from The Foot Fist Way, MGS4 asserts its epic right to GotY-contender status from its first, burnished cutscene.

Following a stunning intro that painstakingly seeks to mimic “war reporting” footage on the news (shaky hand-held camera, deliberately one-step-behind-the-action focus effects, light winking through dust and grime caked on the “lens”), rapidly-aging hero Solid Snake is abruptly thrust into the middle of all-out war. Suddenly, seamlessly, you’re in control. No sneaky entrances via sewer or HALO jump here—the driving tenet behind MGS4 from its initial announcement has been “No Place To Hide,” and indeed, this brutal introduction serves to establish immediately that the game will not be MGS as you know it.

Although it hasn’t been advertised as such, MGS4



sports a gameplay overhaul just as significant as Resident Evil 4’s famous “full model change.” Even after having zealously pursued every snippet of MGS4 info for several years, I was astonished at how different it felt. As much as his detractors like to claim that Kojima develops in a vacuum, this spurious notion is obviously false. MGS4 is post-RE4 and post-Gears, with a fully controllable camera and completely redesigned combat system that can be switched between Leon/Marcus over-the-shoulder third-person and “FPS” modes on the fly.

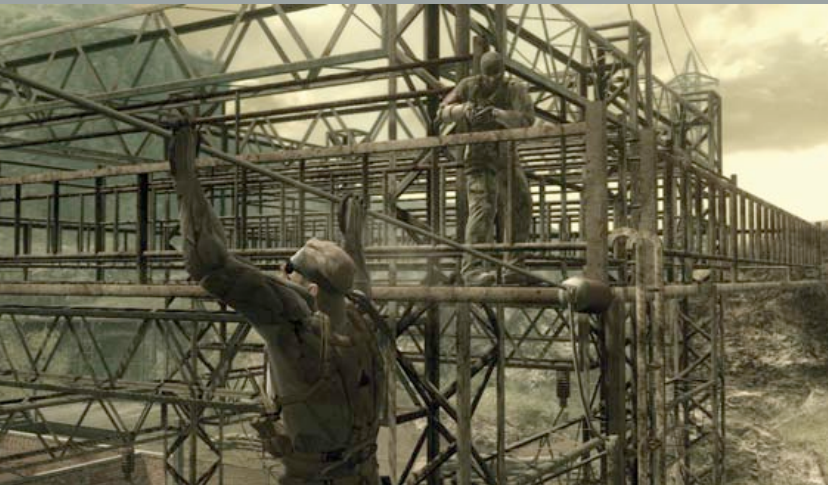
Previous MGS games have always not-so-subtly insinuated that killing people and blowing shit up was somehow philosophically inferior to lurking in the shadows and leaving nothing in your wake, but MGS4 makes no such pretention. It daren’t—for much of the game, Snake is crossing territory in which two unrelated PMC factions are busy annihilating each other. If you leave them to their own devices, they’ll continually war with each other... but you have to get through them somehow. Whether that means aiding one side in their fight against the other, attempting to kill everyone, or lightly treading the sidelines and staying out of skirmishes as much as possible is solely up to you. It’s still possible to play the entire game without ever taking a single life, but that challenge is now exponentially more difficult. For the die-hard set that will undoubtedly insist on doing so, Snake is equipped with the miniature Metal Gear MkII, a cutesy remotely-controlled mech that can stealth camouflage itself and electrocute enemies into unconsciousness. It’s fun and fresh, but going in with guns blazing is simply more fun.

I like to believe that MGS4 was primarily designed to be played in such a way that everyone must die, and the new weapon shop/upgrade system supports that interpretation. After meeting the mysterious “gun

launderer”, Drebin, Snake can acquire ID-tagged guns from fallen enemy soldiers, and earn Drebin Points by selling them. Points are used like Pesetas in RE4 to buy new weapons, untag those previously acquired, and customize them to a remarkable extent—slide-on grenade launchers, suppressors, grips, laser sights and flashlights are all available. The sheer number of different weapons Snake can use (many having no parallel in a previous MGS) is astonishing, let alone the myriad ways they can be upgraded for damage, armor penetration, reloading speed and stability. Indeed, there are far too many combinations to test in actual combat; thankfully, a virtual shooting range is always available to test fire your weapons.

SNAKE has many new stirring tools of destruction (both in terms of controls and in-game arsenal), but the true beauty of MGS4’s gameplay comes equally from the fact that it retains an ineffable MGS-ness. Few would argue that RE4 felt much like a classic RE, but you needn’t worry that the grand shooting augmentation given to MGS4 has devolved the game into straight TPS. Throughout the length of the 25 to 30 hour campaign (at least a third of which is cutscenes—hey, it’s MGS), you’ll find familiar scenarios, gameplay styles and set-pieces: quieter puzzle-based sections, lengthy battles atop moving vehicles, an imaginative sequence spent trailing a specific operative through the back alleys of a gothic Eastern European city, and even a thunderous Metal Gear-on-Metal Gear showdown. I don’t want to get too specific, but the sun-baked Middle Eastern locale shown in every trailer represents only about a fifth of the total area Snake covers. You’ll find yourself sneaking and fighting through heavy jungle, frozen tundra, and urban sprawl across several continents. In fact, every single key location in the game has enough assets to





"Any MGS fan knows that narrative is at least as central to the experience as gameplay, and in this regard I was left quite genuinely speechless."

support a complete Western FPS—it's no wonder Kojima Productions had trouble squeezing the game into a dual-layer, 50-gigabyte Blu-ray disc.

Like any MGS, most gameplay high points stem from the boss battles. Bravura is the only way to describe these encounters: each has enough ingenuity to comprise the sum total of any number of lesser games' gameplay model. Your main opponents are deliciously Kojiman—the woe-begotten "Beauty & the Beast Corps", four cybernetically-enhanced, inhumanly beautiful women with comically melodramatic pasts. There's an element of self-parody here (indeed, a thread of constant self-reference weaves its way throughout the game), and even the duels themselves might be considered pastiches of past MGS bosses. Although there are a few surprise bosses with riotously fresh gameplay schemes that I will refrain from spoiling, each member of the B&B Corps combines the best elements from two or three MGS bosses of yore. It's no longer "the sniper battle", or "the boss that hides", or "the psychic boss"—although all of the above are referenced, they come in combinations reminiscent of past glories, while concurrently shattering long-standing MGS boss rules. This "MGS All-Stars" approach—the B&B Corps are named after FOXHOUND members for a reason—is the same path walked by the story itself, and I can't imagine a better send-off for the series.

Any MGS fan knows that narrative is at least as central to the experience as gameplay, and in this regard I was left quite genuinely speechless: the story manages to be at once sprawling and remarkably tight. Kojima and co-writer Shuyo Murata somehow manage to bring back

virtually every living MGS character, while simultaneously wrapping up all dangling plot threads. It's that simple, and no more can be said without ruining the proceedings. Who are the Patriots? What became of the Philosopher's Legacy? What happened to Olga's daughter? How could Liquid Snake's consciousness have remained in his arm...? You'll have eminently satisfying answers to all of these questions, as well as many more you may never have even considered. Other than a few new elements that are obviously introduced to open a door for future Snake-less MGS games, only one long-standing mystery is left unsolved. It's poignant, and done on purpose, involving a character whose motives have always been shadowy. I respect the restraint shown in this one touch perhaps more than the breakneck stream of reveals, although I can't deny that the nearly 90-minute long ending and its final, scintillant twist left me battered, gut-punched and misty. There is no parallel in gaming for what transpires here—we have finally seen the last of a character we've lived with for twenty-one years. No other series can boast such a sense of history, and with the deification of Solid Snake in MGS4, that history has been done justice.

Debriefing

The auteur theory: a notion in film criticism that certain directors can truly be considered the authors of their work, collaborators be damned. I believe in it, and feel that Hideo Kojima is gaming's first and only auteur. If I ever had any

doubts, MGS4 has dispelled them. His stamp is palpable in every pixel. The man has always been concerned with microscopic, seemingly superfluous details, and there are thousands of them here to savor and cherish. I have no doubt that Kojima mandated each and every one of them, in the way only an auteur in complete control could: such elements would be the first things to be cut in a game designed by committee. Any number of factors—the rise of cheap, narrative-free casual games and the very real danger of MGS4's financial failure among them—might mean that we are never treated to the work of a single gaming author on such a grand scale ever again.

Even if for that reason alone, there is no missing Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots. It is one of the most significant milestones in video game history.

parting
shot



MGS4 is the finest PlayStation 3 game yet, but it is not for everyone.

Series virgins will undoubtedly appreciate the finely-honed action gameplay, but will be left completely baffled by the story. There are other niggling issues, but considering the scope of the game, all are trifles: an occasionally tetchy camera, three-minute long installs before each act, and the rapid writing off of some minor plot threads are the only complaints I can level against this otherwise bravura work of genius.



GRID

Race-day flashbacks

words Mike Griffin

Codemasters' most consistent internal team is their Racing Studio, a fact confirmed by last year's excellent off-road racer *DiRT*. It was the first game to embrace Ego, Codemasters' impressive proprietary next-gen engine. In late April, the team made headlines again after absorbing the entire Sega Racing Studio (developers of the underrated *Sega Rally Revo*). They saved many jobs and acquired significant talent in this last-minute deal with a cost-cutting Sega. Fast-forward to June and Codemasters' second Ego-powered racer, *GRID*, has now arrived. This is a supremely confident street racer for your Xbox 360, PS3 or PC, supported by big, stylish presentation and ubiquitous car damage effects—even online, in smooth 12-vehicle multiplayer.

In the wake of *Gran Turismo 5: Prologue*'s invulnerable vehicles, you can almost hear a sigh of relief with every exploding windshield, pulverized hood, dismantled door, and smashed bumper in *GRID*. It's realistic enough that I physically cringed when imploding the front end of a stunning Audi R10. Yes, the game's physics and crashes are wonderfully simulated and its vehicle models and interiors are sumptuously accurate, however *GRID* is not a persnickety simulator. It's as accessible as a *Need for Speed* or *Juiced* game (and destroys anything those franchises have produced this generation), as stylish as a *Ridge Racer* with the superb physics and world complexity of *DiRT*.

You'll get to watch your stunning crashes again in a great replay mode, and in *GRID*, self-preservation is part of the process. A handful of Flashbacks are available

"You can almost hear a sigh of relief with every exploding windshield, pulverized hood, dismantled door, and smashed bumper..."

each race, sort of like extra lives or continues, allowing you to rewind time to just seconds before the impact. This is a very generous offering to newcomers, as they learn well-designed tracks across venues in the U.S., Europe, and Japan. Every race involves a wager based on certain conditions, and it's always a little more rewarding if you choose to race in Pro mode, without the crutch of Flashbacks. It's certainly a great training mechanism, however, and it's enjoyable to manipulate and relish your errors knowing that you can take a mulligan.

With around four dozen vehicles, *GRID* is a tad light in this area compared to some of its contemporaries, and the choice in paint/liveries isn't as extensive as, say, the latest *PGR* or *Forza*. However, *GRID* remains a premium multi-discipline road racer with tons of tour content, superior track layouts, and fine vehicle feel. It looks and sounds terrific on all platforms, roaring next-gen horsepower. The near-flawless execution of online multiplayer with damage effects reels it in. The best racing game I've played this year.

parting shot



I referenced *Ridge Racer* earlier regarding *GRID*'s style—the bright hues and arcadey spectacle, but the similarities end when it comes to drifting technique. *GRID*'s drift is decidedly less embellished, and more technical and deliberate.



OVERLORD:

Raising Hell

See evil, hear evil, speak evil, be evil

words Dave Halverson

Having finally killed Oberon, the guardian deity of a vast swampland occupied by foul creatures, carnivorous unicorns, and the spirits of the elfin race that once thrived there, I find myself atop the Golden Hills. On my left a river winds through a deep canyon; to my right lays the stone portal that rises from the earth wherever I travel. Besides the sound of the wind gently blowing back the tall grass, it's eerily quiet—except for the sinister quibbling of the 30 minions I've called to my side; 15 Greens and 15 Browns. Over the course of the last two days I've become especially fond of my Browns. They're not the brightest, in fact they rarely think for themselves at all. They live to serve me and they are my strongest warriors. They can't swim, extinguish flames, or dispense poison clouds, but I have my Blues, Reds, and Greens for that. My Browns live to pillage and kill, unless I command them otherwise. Getting back to the Golden Hills, it's what's in front of me that's troubling. You see, I've finally purged the Dwarf Lands and there's an angry-looking Dwarf Warrior clad in armor in the distance, waddling my way. I could send my entire horde to eat him alive in a few seconds, but they have a tendency to lose focus and wander off in search of weapons, gold (to bring back to me, "for the master!") or anything they can wear or destroy, and I don't need the attention just now. Noticing a chest of bombs just ahead, left carelessly on the trail, it's much easier to send a single minion to grab yonder bomb and taunt the dwarf, leading him away and then dropping it at his feet just before the countdown ends. Boom! No more Dwarf Warrior. My minions seemed to really enjoy it, too. Across the canyon I notice a stone giant guarding a cave—that'll be fun—but just over the next bluff there's a whole Dwarf village to plunder. I am the Overlord, and my sole objective is to reclaim dominion over the lands surrounding my dark tower after a Fellowship of Heroes decided it might be a good idea to murder me.

When you awaken in Overlord, all that's left of your empire is your pain-in-the-ass jester, wicked little high priest, and a few Browns. The first hours of the game are spent re-acclimating yourself with controlling your minions and finding and retrieving the hives for your Reds, Greens, and Blues. After the Browns help free the Reds, you need the Reds to free the Greens and the Greens to free the Blues. Each hive is hidden deep within infested burrows, hovels, and marshes, and once you find one you need to clear the way for your minions to carry it to the nearest tower portal before you can summon that color. Each area outside of Spree, the human-occupied colony where the people worship you (unless you start killing them), is crawling with twisted

"There's nothing that warms the heart more than watching your happy little demons terrorizing and killing a herd of yummy sheep."

fairy-tale creatures and labyrinthine in origin—the game is stuffed with ecological riddles. By the time you've collected all three hives, you're a pro at "sweeping"—the act of guiding your hordes into places you can't travel, and all of the various tactics associated with the game's elaborate level design and myriad of battles. The idea is to rape, pillage, murder, and ultimately rule, losing as few minions as possible. You can only conjure as many minions as you've harvested, but besides doing your dirty work you also need them to sacrifice





themselves to replenish your health and mana (which they gleefully do) and to forge and upgrade armor and weapons. Once you find the tower forges, the more minions you sacrifice, the stronger the weapons and armor you forge become. So you need lots and lots of minions. It's also vital that you master the art of battle, and it is indeed an art in raising hell. The Overlord can attack at will but he's a sitting duck without his hordes. If you find yourself running low on a certain color minion, you'll need to travel or warp from your tower to wherever their prey roams free. Browns, for instance, love to kill sheep, and the Mellow Hills are crawling with them. There's nothing that warms the heart more than watching your happy little demons terrorizing and killing a herd of yummy sheep. Each kill releases an essence that allows you to conjure another minion. It's also necessary that you visit the tower every so often, especially after you've attained a woman to keep the place up. The first companion you run across is a nice young lady who does the place up all rosy; I suggest you ditch her the moment you find her dark, sexual sister. You have to murder her fiancé anyway, and this one knows how to decorate, Castlevania-style.

Overlord is a vast open-world game, but there are no maps or waypoints to be set. You're given an onscreen mini-map (new to the PS3 version) to get your bearings, but otherwise this is a game for the nomadic at heart. The areas aren't so big that it's overwhelming, but you will get lost now and again until you know your way around, and certain areas are trickier than others. Evernight, for instance, is like one giant marshland riddle, but oh so fun to unravel. I can't tell you how happy I was to finally be left to my own devices in a game of this nature. No prodding, hints, or direction, just me and my little demons. The PS3 version is the way to go, since each land (Mellow Hills, Evernight, Heaven's Peak, Golden Hills, and Ruborian Desert) has an Abyss—massive new maps that add hours and hours of gameplay and look amazing. The entire game resembles a twisted storybook, and believe me when I say that it looks and plays better and better for the duration. It's not without flaw—ancillary villagers repeat phrases ad nauseam and the Overlord himself is on the clunky side—but neither affect gameplay. In fact, in this case I almost liked that the Overlord was somewhat rigid; it kind of fits his silent, wicked demeanor. Overlord has the strategy and depth of an RPG, the action of a hack 'n' slash, and the environmental puzzles of the best adventures, all wrapped in a delicious dark-comedy fantasy world. You won't find another game like it...yet. I'm officially on sequel watch. Too bad Triumph Studios is all the way in Denmark.

You can't kill what's
already dead...but
food can.

parting
shot



Overlord: Raising Hell is brilliantly designed, absolutely beautiful, has remarkable depth, and is one of the most original and addicting games I've played this year. It's also many days long and begs to be replayed, once being merciful and once killing anything that moves. It's better than ever on PS3 too, and in 7.1 surround!



Ninja Gaiden II

An orgy of violence with the grace of ballet

words Casey Loe

"Like its predecessor, Ninja Gaiden II has a level of depth that justifies its level of difficulty."

This is what happens when you play with knives.



When I first saw *Ninja Gaiden II* at last year's Tokyo Game Show, I was completely underwhelmed. I had expected something dramatic—a radical new look, online co-op, an open-world structure. Instead I got *Ninja Gaiden* with a few tweaks, some new weapons, and the expected next-gen graphical upgrades. But the final version of *Ninja Gaiden II* is no cause for disappointment. By focusing their energy on refinements to the *Ninja Gaiden* formula, Team Ninja may have failed to shock anyone or revolutionize anything, but they did succeed in taking a great game and honing it nearly to perfection.

The most significant upgrade is the massive arsenal that is now available to Ryu. New weapons include a scythe, tonfas, kusari-gama, and the Falcon's Talons hand-and-foot claw set, all four of which are well-balanced, beautifully animated, and a ton of fun to play. Even the returning weapons, including the double katanas, flail, and Lunar staff, have been revamped to fill new roles in a combat system that is now heavily focused on limb dismemberment. (Maiming foes allows you to set them up for flashy one-hit-kill obliteration attacks, but causes the crippled foes to focus on desperate, damaging suicide attacks.) Limb-removal potential is just one factor to consider in each of the 60 or so techniques in each weapon's move list, so it'll take a great deal of practice to master every one. With more weapons than one can comfortably use in a single play-through, *Ninja Gaiden II* has more to offer in terms of replay value than the usual unlockable difficulty modes.

The difficulty curve has also been dramatically revamped. I feared the worst when the first boss died in two good combos and the second level was only

"Ninja Gaiden II's most overlooked triumph may be its volume of content."

marginally harder the first, but the developers haven't scrapped the intense difficulty of the original—they've merely smoothed it out so that each level is generally tougher than the one that precedes it. (If your reaction to that is "well, no duh!" then you probably didn't play the original *Ninja Gaiden*, where the difficulty spikes were scattered willy-nilly throughout). *Ninja Gaiden II* is fairly easy at first, but you'll be sweating by Chapter 4, cursing like a stable boy with anal warts by Chapter 6, and football-spiking your controller from Chapter 8 on. But like its predecessor, *Ninja Gaiden II* has a level of depth that justifies its level of difficulty. Since there are always new moves, new weapons, and new tactics to experiment with when you get stuck, *Ninja Gaiden* can offer a satisfying challenge where similarly difficult games offer mostly aggravation. However, *Ninja Gaiden II* does have several parts that are just complete and utter bullshit, like pairs of bosses without a save point between them, and a boss that unexpectedly explodes after you defeat him, killing you instantly.

While nothing can redeem those decisions, the new life-recovery system helps reduce the aggravation factor elsewhere. Whenever you take damage, only a small percentage of it is permanent, and the rest is recovered automatically at the end of the fight. So if there's a series of eight battles between checkpoints, you'll no longer be tempted to reset when you get your ass kicked on the second fight, because you'll still be going into the third with 80% of your health. I should also note that there is an initially selectable "Path of the Acolyte" mode that will go much easier on players who are new to the series, so newcomers shouldn't let all the talk of difficulty dissuade them from giving the game a chance.

Ninja Gaiden II's most overlooked triumph may be its volume of content. *Devil May Cry 4*, its only real competitor in the next-gen action genre, offered only a handful of environments and forced you to play through each one multiple times. But *Ninja Gaiden II* serves up over a dozen hour-long levels that look radically different from each other, span a massive amount of terrain, and typically contain at least one completely original boss. In a generation that is being defined by the costs of content creation, it's rare to get this much out of an action game. The levels look great, too; while there are a few generic caves and ruined temples, you'll spend more of your time fighting on the scenic streets of Tokyo, New York, and Venice, and in the blood-soaked homelands of *Ninja Gaiden*'s demonic fiends. The environments do lose points for being so frozen—the streets are eerily empty and almost nothing is destructible, but you can't have everything.

Unfortunately, Team Ninja hasn't succeeded in fixing all of the original game's flaws. The camera system has been revamped for *Ninja Gaiden II*'s larger environments, and the camera now darts around the battlefield like a meth-addled hummingbird, determined to never lose track of Ryu. This both is and isn't an improvement over the original *Ninja Gaiden*'s flawed camera system, which often lost track of Ryu and his enemies completely. It takes a while to get used to the speed with which the camera now moves, and by focusing on Ryu you'll often



be left confused about the placement of your enemies. Ultimately, the new camera does feel like an improvement over the original *Ninja Gaiden*'s, but not nearly as much of an improvement as I would have liked.

The loading times, on the other hand, have not improved at all. The game still freezes in mid-battle to load at times, and it's still possible to get stuck fighting on invisible lines that trigger a five-second load every time they're crossed. Worse yet, the game has an unusually lengthy load whenever you die and continue, as if the game was dumping the entire level or boss fight from memory and then reloading it from scratch. That's not the only sign of technical sloppiness you'll see in *Ninja Gaiden II*: The game sometimes slows down when the action gets intense, or skips frames even when nothing is going on.

While the developers stumbled occasionally, they made the right decisions far more often than not. In doing so, they've preserved everything that made the original *Ninja Gaiden* great, and built off of it to create something that should thrill hardcore fans and newbies alike. My only caveat—if you've been diagnosed with anger-management issues, you should probably get your therapist's permission first.



parting shot



Ninja Gaiden II defines the new generation of action games just as forcefully as its predecessor defined the previous one. Despite a few bumpy parts, this is a must-play.

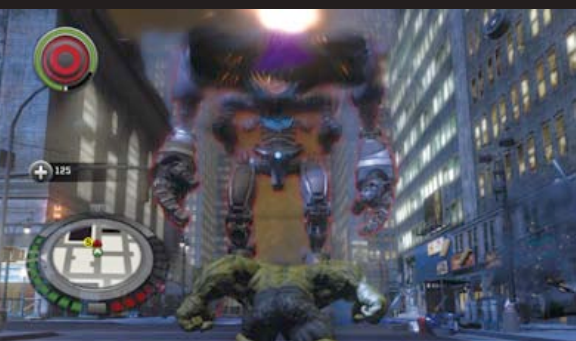


"You're the Hulk. We're not here to be dainty."

The Incredible Hulk

If it moves, or not, smash it up!

words Dave Halverson



First things first: Buyer beware on this one. The 360 version of the Incredible Hulk reviewed here is so graphically superior to the Wii and PS2 versions that they can't be compared.

This game lives and dies by its visuals, so do the math. I knew going in what I was in for with The Incredible Hulk: Proceed to the marked area on your mini-map, step into the glowing icon and complete the movie-derivative mission or any number of side quests or mini-games. That's what these games do, with how well they succeed reliant on a combination of gameplay and graphics.

Much in the way of detail is always sacrificed to make a game this big. After years of comic book movie games set among under-realized cityscapes, I couldn't wait to see what the seventh-generation would deliver. As expected, there are more cars on the street—mostly taxis, but I realize there's a limit to how far you can go—and more people. The people look okay, better than before, but still react in the usual canned manner and seem to all shop at the same store. No big deal, though; this game is so over-the-top destructive, it's a good thing the people are set dressing because you will murder them by the hundreds within the game's missions. Newsstands, phone booths, and the like go hurling at the slightest touch in The Incredible Hulk. Graze a car and it's a firebomb. Step in front of one and it careens into a store window, mowing down people like bowling pins... that's walking. Run or jump and everyone and everything dies. You can creep along playing operation, but why? You're the Hulk. We're not here to be dainty.

Hulk himself is indeed incredible, one of the best character models I have ever seen. And he's a gas to control, sprinting across the city, flying up the sides of buildings, and jumping the length of a football field. Within missions, he's a force of bad nature. Buses and cars can be hurled at will or collapsed into steel gloves, thunderclaps produce a concentrated hurricane, and ground-pounding leaps let you literally bury your opponents in the street. Hulk can topple buildings like a one-creature demolition, or grab whatever is in his vicinity to pound away at what ails him. He can also target enemies on the ground and in the air. This is one seriously deranged one-man killing machine.

The various areas of the city look great up close,



but stand atop a skyscraper and you get a grey abyss. However, the trade-off of destruction over long-range detail is the right choice here. The missions themselves are nicely diversified—from slapping Rick Jones on your back (the boy can take a bullet or 100) and diffusing bombs, to wiping out military installations, taking on the Enclaves manufactured superheroes, or toppling various monstrosities...all the usual suspects and more are here, along with mini-games and side missions galore. The cinematics are in-engine, though, so be warned—creepy puppetlike versions of Ed Norton (who does a great job in the booth) and co. in the house.

The Incredible Hulk may not be the pinnacle of what open-world comic book movie games can be (they had to make it work on Wii and PS2) but it's a helluva good start if you feel the need to beat the crap out of man, machine, and a city or two.

parting shot 

Throw practicality out the window as far as you can and just let Big Green run wild and you'll have a helluva good time with The Incredible Hulk, if you have a 360 or PS3. Otherwise, well, you won't.

Kung Fu Panda

Bear with me

words Dave Halverson

Luxoflux designed Kung Fu Panda on the premise that a series of dissimilar gameplay elements is preferable to a traditional singularly focused game. I assumed that the reason for the torrent of momentum-killing scenarios was a means of slipping in most of the film's titular critters, only to find out after finishing the game that it was actually the master plan. Setting out on the game's initial training level, cleverly disguised as a Po dream sequence, it's immediately evident that this is no ordinary movie game. Every aspect of the production screams quality (on 360 and PS3). Gorgeous normal-mapped textures, picture-perfect character models and animation, great physics, and a bevy of promising play mechanics point toward an exceptional platforming adventure, but it sadly never fully materializes. The series of "new gameplay elements"—a single flying level (for which you can't change the X or Y axis), an assortment of various quick-time events, a seemingly endless salvo of treasure protection, and way too many levels featuring Po's tiny master, Shifu—aren't "new" at all. All they really succeed in doing is taking us away from the game's core strength; Po-latforming.

Fortunately there's enough here to save the day, but this one could have been great. The Po levels are



"Setting out on the game's initial training level...it's immediately evident that this is no ordinary movie game."



pure gold. For a big guy, he's a gas to control; great double jump, he can curl up and roll, and he has a ton of awesome kung fu moves that can all be enhanced, provided you don't spend most of your coins on buying him new outfits like I did. The game's wetlands contain some of the best-looking water I have ever seen, and the boss battles (Po's, at least) really bring the game's excellent gameplay elements to life. There's plenty of variety in the Po levels themselves, too—way more than in all of the others combined—making it all the more curious that they felt the need to inject so many

disruptions. Po's pals simply aren't nearly as cool as he is. I hope they fair better in the film. If Luxoflux would have built the entire game around Po, this might be one of the best critter-based movie games ever—especially considering the extras, including a ton of super-cool multi-player mini-map battles featuring the gamut of characters, both good and evil, giving us a chance to control the villains made especially for the game. But even so, it's sure to please its core demographic (kids) and win the hearts of many a casual gamer, so mission accomplished.

parting
shot



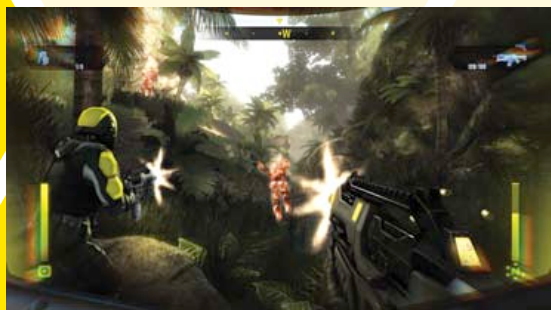
What could have been a five-star platforming adventure is marred by multiple character scenarios that shift the focus away from Po's wonderful platforming and kung-fu gameplay. Still, Kung Fu Panda is an incredibly well-made, very fun game indicative of what 7th-generation movie gaming has in store, and loaded with extras.



Haze

Drugs are bad, so is war

words Brady Fiechter



How do you approach a game, on PlayStation 3, that opens with a cheesy, amateurish live-action sequence of a soldier engaged in a portending statement about the coming war? Do you scratch your head, or do you accept that it must be Free Radical toying with a little irony while establishing the defiant tone of the game? Haze has ideas it wants so badly to make work—hey, kid, violence is a twisted drug, war is not a game—but it strains so hard at times trying to execute that you miss the scattered finer points, left with a game of one wrong turn after another.

Haze's gameplay is earnest in introducing some clever combat angles yet way off the mark in making those angles necessary. Tossing a nectar-enhanced grenade into a batch of soldiers and watching them turn on each other is a kick, and planting grenades in the ground as trip wires could have proved eventful with more aggressively minded enemies, but in the end you'll likely resort to little beyond pulling the trigger of the same gun over and over. Even though the game moves well, and lining the enemy in your sights is satisfying, the action is just too subdued to matter.

Inconsistencies and loose direction further disarm the occasional high points. Free Radical hits you with a slick bit of atmosphere and strong set pieces—the swamp level is quite impressive—then you pass through other sections that are flat and uninspired. The opening raid in the jungle is about as lifeless as this

"There is writing in Haze that is fascinating and bold, and there is writing in Haze that is typical videogame slop."

All yipped up in the jungle.



genre gets, getting the game off to a portentous start.

Haze is a technical mess in a lot of ways, but it deserves praise in doses; it's simple and modestly stylized, and I will take this world over Halo 3's cheesy apple jacks explosion any day. Problem is, this is a world so boringly laid out that it's hard to appreciate the pleasing touches, and by game's end, you forget that "pleasing" was ever a mention.

Haze was made by the talents who brought such quirky fun and personality to Time Splitters and hit a high note with Second Sight, but here the gamemakers feel lost to that same level of color and energy. Despite some obvious choices to get away from the military shooter template, the growing feeling of another generic "hoorah!" shooter lingers with a choke hold the farther along you go. Grabbing some friends for some four-player co-op may juice the game a little, as it almost always naturally does, but this does nothing to alter the larger deficiencies.

There is writing in Haze that is fascinating and bold, and there is writing in Haze that is typical videogame slop. The voice acting is indefensible, but even worse are the repetitive, vapid one-liners and looped screams. So much was spoken pre-release in favor of serious storytelling, of establishing a world of conviction and ponderance, but the gameplay brings no expression into that.

Not often do you play a boxed copy of a game and find yourself having to reset the PS3 to save a crash, or witness characters freaking out as they glitch in and out in front of you, or watch level details snap, crackle and pop around you. Attacking Haze is easy and realistic, but don't write the game off completely. Free Radical demonstrates an undercurrent of talent here that some insatiable gamers might find worth exploring here. Yes, Haze is a devastating disappointment, but sometimes the biggest failings can make you stronger. A sequel would be welcome.

parting
shot



This is, to me, the most disappointing high-profile game to be released in the last couple years. It's not a complete disaster, but you'll have to be awfully forgiving to allow its good qualities to take hold. Rent this one... cautiously.

System: Xbox 360 | Developer: Idea Factory | Publisher: Atlus | Multi: None | ESRB: Teen | Available: July 29

Spectral Force 3

The power of 3

The Strategy RPG has emerged as the shovel-ware genre of choice in Japan, thanks largely to the prolific output of the ironically named "Idea Factory" development studio. Like most of Idea Factory's games, Spectral Force 3 is a turn-based strategy RPG with generic fantasy characters, utilitarian graphics, and a few unique touches—in this case, examples include an action bar that allows you to take up to 7 actions per character per turn, and the ability to tag team foes with allied characters. Spectral Force could be considered their flagship series (this is something like the seventh installment), but this is the first to be released in the states.

In this installment, you play a young warrior who leads a mercenary troop that is willing to work for any of the world's many warring factions. Most of the plot happens in the background as you sign up for missions offered by one army of the other, and you often get the feeling your troop is battling characters that would have been the heroes in a more traditional narrative. It's an interesting angle from which to tell a story, but since most of the battles have no connection to the game's core story, it's not a particularly compelling one.

Spectral Force 3 has very simple graphics, with no flourishes outside of a few animated cut scenes. But while Idea Factory hasn't quite figured out what to do with the capabilities of next-gen systems, they do know

"This should have been an XBLA game, damn it."

how to make a solid strategy game. The characters in Spectral Force 3 offer a few twists on old classes, and you'll accumulate a huge roster of them as the story progresses. (Too many in fact, since your party is capped at six characters and there's really no reason to level-up the late-game arrivals.) The enemy AI is quite smart, which allows the game to offer a nice challenge without merely overpowering you. And there are always a good half-dozen optional battles to choose from, so you won't ever run out of things to do. Of course, they don't differ much, but they're consistently fast-paced and fun.

With its no-frills presentation, a few menu-based RPG elements, and a repetitive yet fundamentally entertaining battle system, Spectral Force 3 reminds me a lot of Puzzle Quest... Except that it costs four times as much. At \$60, Spectral Force 3's price is utterly ridiculous, considering that there are countless superior SRPG's available for half that price on the PlayStation 2, Nintendo DS, and PSP. Yes, this is basically the only decent turn-based strategy game on the Xbox 360, but do you really not own any other systems? Really? I know it's trite to say "this should have been an XBLA game," but... This should have been an XBLA game, damn it. **Casey Lee**



parting shot

Spectral Force 3 is a perfectly serviceable turn-based strategy game, but there is absolutely nothing special enough about it to justify its price. Unless you can show me receipts proving you own every game in the Final Fantasy Tactics, Disgaea, Fire Emblem, and Advance Wars series, you do not have my permission to spend \$60 on this game.

System: Xbox 360, PS3 | Developer: Nerve / id Software | Publisher: Activision | Multi: 16 players | ESRB: Teen | Available: May

Enemy Territory: Quake Wars

Disable the MCP!

Don't come to the console version of Quake Wars looking for an elaborate single-player FPS campaign, as it's pretty much a glorified bot match here. There's actually less pre-mission GDF and Strogg narrative than the PC version, if that's possible. The bot AI offers a coordinated fight, but they play and move like MP bots, not like expressive, scripted campaign enemies. Approach Enemy Territory: Quake Wars with a headset, a fast broadband connection and a cooperative attitude. It was built for team-based multiplayer with other humans. Offline-only players will not be thrilled.

The core Enemy Territory flow prevails in Quake Wars on console. Each time the front line moves up a notch it's because a primary mission has been completed, and every class may also complete lesser objectives. Securing objectives yields experience points to unlock upgrades during a campaign, and it's remarkably easy to figure out what class is needed to tackle an objective in the console version thanks to simplified menus and HUD.

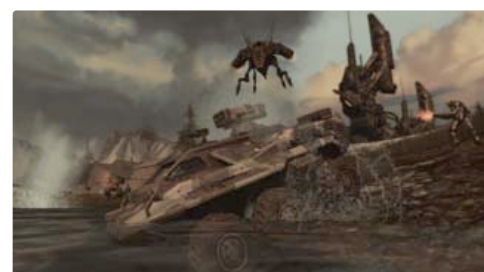
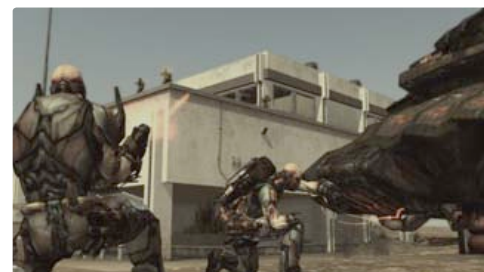
Overall, Quake Wars is a reduced transfer, looking muddier than the PC version, plagued by inferior adaptations like excessive FoV skew, one-way weapon selection and less-than-optimal aiming. You'll still enjoy the tight multiplayer level design and balance on console, but it's wrong that it costs \$25 more and delivers less than its PC counterpart. **Mike Griffin**



"The core ET flow prevails in Quake Wars on console."

parting shot

Unless you read the manual, Quake Wars does very little to engage the player in the lore of the Quake universe. With close to 8 months to complete the console port, why not include a few cut-scenes between campaigns?





System: PS3, Xbox 360 | Dev: Traveller's Tales | Pub: LucasArts
ESRB: E | Avail: June 3

Lego Indiana Jones

It sure is nice to see a game that is this playful and blithe while packing in some seriously fun gameplay to boot. Lego Indiana Jones is pretty straightforward action-platform affair and light in the challenge department, but everything is skillfully presented and full of some pretty clever humor around the Indiana Jones theme. The lego bits are as charming as they've ever been and actually more interestingly used than in the Star Wars series. While the game doesn't seem very intent on doing anything you wouldn't have expected, and the overuse of some basic designs gets old, it's a pleasant adventure that engages well enough to get a pass. Great game for casual co-op too. **Brady Fiechter**

System: Wii | Dev: EALA | Pub: EA | ESRB: E | Avail: May

Boom Blox

Family friendly rarely equates to quality family fun, but with Boom Blox, you get both in droves. This is the type of game that has yet to become a Wii-library staple: simple but weighty, visually interesting despite the bare-bone basics. And is it ever a blast! Explosions and tension and puzzles, all cleverly wrapped in a distinct package that packs the appeal of a board game with the strategic trappings of what we love about videogames. Boom Blox rocks in all the important ways needed to make a Wii game shine. **Brady Fiechter**



System: XBLA | Developer: Hothead Games | Publisher: Hothead Games | Multi: NA | ESRB: Teen | Available: May 21, 2008

Penny Arcade Adventures

Episode One: On The Rain-Slick

Comedy doesn't travel well; whether it's a Saturday Night Live skit getting morphed into a movie, or a comedian's stand-up act becoming the basis for a sitcom, the end result is usually far less funny than the source material. So, when we heard web comic fave Penny Arcade was turning its three-paneled recipe for hilarity into a full-fledged videogame—an ongoing episodic adventure RPG, no less—we were more nervous than an orange trapped in a room full of Fruit F--kers.

However, minutes into unraveling PA's loony, almost Lovecraft-like yarn, our concerns were squashed. Not only does the title retain the comic's visual style, but also its skewering vulgar humor. Joining series' stars Gabe and Tycho, players embark on a beyond-bizarre journey that sees them facing off with hobos, mimes and robots; if this doesn't kill your craziness cravings, consider said robots will piss orange juice in your general direction—happy now?

While PA's adults-only humor drives the experience, the gameplay is surprisingly engaging. Simple puzzling, tight turn-based combat and button-mashing mini-games are totally accessible and keep things moving. This one's a no-brainer—even at the higher-than-usual 1600 MS points—for PA's faithful fanbase, but even if produce molestation is totally foreign to you, this satisfying side-stitcher is still worth a download. **Matt Cabral**



System: Xbox 360 | Developer: Success | Publisher: Atlus | Multi: Online & Local Multiplayer | ESRB: Mature | Available: June 24

Operation Darkness

In our preview last month, I said that there was a substantial and creative game at the heart of Operation Darkness, but that Atlus would need to fix the camera and interface issues if they wanted anyone to find it. They did neither. As a result, Operation Darkness is a frustrating mess; a game with a lot of good content sunk by flaws that you'd imagine could be fixed with only a few additional weeks of development time. Those flaws are the camera, which is so twitchy and useless that you'll end up having to position characters by counting pixels on a crude area map, and the lack of any ability to undo a character's movement when you realize that, say, you won't be able to shoot a nearby enemy because a telephone pole is (absurdly) blocking your line of fire.

Atlus really seems to have gone all-out on Operation Darkness's translation, with good text and surprisingly strong voice acting. But putting effort into that sort of thing is like giving a manicure to someone with a gaping chest wound. I'm sure there are a few strategy fanatics who will endure Operation Darkness's flaws to enjoy its cool WWII-with-monsters story and its unique tactics centered around ranged combat and cover. But with such an off-putting interface, I imagine most players won't even make it through the downloadable demo. Definitely try it before you buy it. **Casey Lee**



System: PS3 | Dev: KOEI Canada | Pub: KOEI | ESRB: E | Multi: 1-8

Fatal Inertia EX

Fatal Inertia on Xbox 360 was received with yeah-it's-ok-whatever enthusiasm last year, and there probably won't be much more than that this month for the PS3 twin—even though it's got some worthy qualities backing the awfully generic model of futuristic racing. A new track has been added, which is reduced to nothing more than a bulletpoint for the back of the box of a game that needs more than a new level to make up for all the others that hold fleeting appeal. But then again, for 30 bucks and the fact that there's only WipeoutHD to compare Fatal Inertia EX to, blasting hover ships in a sci-fi world is a good sell if you dig that sort of thing. (Just don't compare it to WipeoutHD.) **Brady Fiechter**



"Just don't compare it to WipeoutHD."

System: Xbox 360, PS3, DS | Developer: Firaxis | Publisher: 2K Games | Multi: 1-4 | ESRB: T | Available: July

Sid Meier's Civilization: Revolution

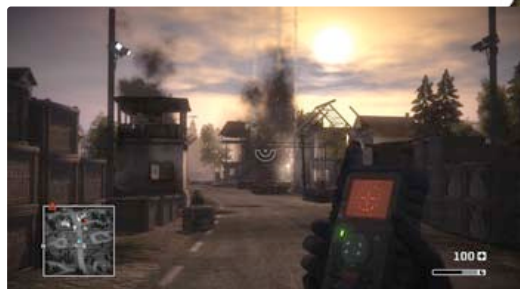
Good old Abraham Lincoln discovered invention and got the Sherman Tank while the other wayward societies got the shaft and a taste of apple pie at the barrel of a gun. Smart and sharp, Revolution brings wonderful turn-based strategy to consoles, even if it's so reliant on its vaunted statistics it assumes that somehow an army of pikemen could, say, defeat a long-range bomber. Condensing a PC classic was a risky move, but the developers managed to keep all that's good and holy with Civilization while making some acceptably goofy concessions (What's Condeleeza Rice doing in a video game?) to create a console-friendly product. Building a civilization, shaping a society, conquering a world here is endlessly addictive. Better still, it's great fun. **Greg Orlando**



System: Xbox 360, PS3, PC | Developer: DICE | Publisher: Electronic Arts | Multi: 2-16 | ESRB: T | Available: Now

Battlefield: Bad Company

Destructalicious to the max, the first-person shooter Battlefield: Bad Company won't win any awards for polished gameplay. Its artificial intelligence-controlled allies are dumber than the bag the hammers go in, and the missions are sometimes impenetrable, incomprehensible, or a fine blend of both. Yet it's maniacally good fun to take out enemies by blowing to hell the building they're camping in, and a goofy sense of humor makes the sour bits a lot more palatable to choke down. A fine multiplayer mode pits two armies against one another in a war over gold, and it's only in the midst of 16-player brawl with helicopters, pounding artillery batteries, and tanks that Bad Company really becomes a welcome guest. **Greg Orlando**



System: WiiWare | Dev: Hudson Soft | Pub: Hudson Soft | ESRB: E | Multi: Online scoreboards | Avail: Now

Star Soldier R

Hudson's first release for Nintendo's new WiiWare service is the kind of game that you're either going to love or hate with little in-between. Based around the bonus "Caravans" of previous titles in the series, Star Soldier R gives you two or five minutes to rack up as many points as possible to earn a higher rank on the game's online scoreboard. And... well, that's basically it. Fans of long, multi-stage shooters will no doubt be left wishing there was more, but after falling in love with Pac-man CE's time attacks, I'm having a blast replaying the game over and over in an attempt to eek out a few more points wherever possible. **Eric L. Patterson**

review

System: DS

Developer: Matrix Software

Publisher: Square Enix

Multi: Wireless Minigame Multiplayer

ESRB Rating: E 10+

Available: July 22

Final Fantasy IV

Finally, Fantasy

words Heather Campbell

So, here's the trouble with Final Fantasy IV DS: I'm looking at a complete and thorough remake of a classic title, with hugely updated graphics and a rewritten, more robust script; the title has been stuffed full of minigames and extra features like movie-viewers, voice acting, and post-game bonus modes; Matrix software and Square Enix have even graced the portable title with dramatic CG cutscenes ... but at the core of all these improvements is a seventeen-year-old title, with outdated battle systems and a fairly straightforward fantasy story. At the time of FFIV's original release, the game showcased all sorts of genre-shifting ideas, from a military hero as its protagonist, to the introduction of the Active Time Battle system, but these concepts have not only been drained of their novelty in nearly two decades since the game came out, they've been largely abandoned for newer, more radical systems and stories.

I guess what we're looking at here is a essentially a DVD reissue of a classic black-and-white silent film. Like Safety Last! or The Gold Rush, but reshot and dubbed. We can celebrate Matrix and Square Enix for giving a new generation of gamers a chance to experience FFIV (although, let's face it—this generation has gotten four new chances to try out FFIV in the last seven years); we can cheer the quality of the presentation, and the rever-



ence of the changes, but the game remains, unfortunately, an old dog.

Gamers who cherish their heritage, who enjoy revisiting old titles to uncover and engage the choices that are the foundation of modern games are going to love Final Fantasy IV for the DS. When Square first dropped us into this world back in the early 90's, the decisions were stunning. So often, RPGs follow the young man with a great destiny. He finds a sword in a cave, and a goddess tells him he's going to save the world. Compare that with this tragic setup of a grizzled dark knight, whose conscience begs him to question his king. Cecil starts Final Fantasy IV with decades of backstory behind him. He's already met the woman he loves, and his adventuring party is an old friend. This was unheard of in console RPGs. Even today, more game companies stick to the young-boy-with-a-magic-sword model than leaping out on a limb like this. As a suggestion of where to begin an RPG, it's hard to beat Final Fantasy IV. So many of today's fans celebrate Cloud, right? Well, you can bet we wouldn't have seen that mercenary hop from the Midgar train if it wasn't for Cecil's years of military experience.

Final Fantasy IV is a great game ... but despite the facelift, it is an old one. The question is one of audience. When you read the word *classic*, does it make your wallet

"You can bet we wouldn't have seen that mercenary hop from the Midgar train if it wasn't for Cecil's years of military experience."

itch? Or are you the type of gamer who would forgo the patience required by a seventeen-year-old title for more novel, and ultimately shallower fare?

parting shot

A stellar remake that showcases Square's heritage, Final Fantasy IV is as good as it was in 1991 ... and maybe even better. But RPGs have come a long way since then—so, as current as the graphics may appear, the play is still retro.



No, the NES didn't have this.



preview

System: DS Developer: Vogster Publisher: TBA ESRB: Pending Available: Summer

"While Robocalypse looks like a cartoon (and a really cool one at that) it plays like a serious strategy game..."

Robocalypse

When toasters attack...

words Dave Halverson

Back when playing a strategy game ranked somewhere between getting a root canal and playing Zany Golf, a TurboGrafx game called Military Madness (the U.S. version of Natsume's Nectaris) came along and changed everything. The precursor to games like Advance Wars, it was based on the simple premise of managing your tank battalions and troops and then sitting back and watching your handiwork. It wasn't that the gameplay was anything new; it was the art and character design that set it apart. Robocalypse reminds me a lot of Military Madness. Not because it's similar in gameplay or structure—Robocalypse is one of the freshest takes on the genre since Cannon Fodder—but because the hand-drawn art and character design are so unique and appealing that it beckons you to play, whether you're into strategy games or not.

Things get under way at a factory that's simultaneously (not to mention unscrupulously) fabricating toasters and military robots: Professor Flaxen Hayer (yellow hair, huge melons) sets off a chain reaction by shoving a sanitation engineer into the gear works, creating an evil toaster/



military robot hybrid bent on terrorizing the countryside. Myron, the toaster logic programmer, warned Mr. Yellin' that something like this could happen! With a little help from Myron's brain control device and a few stodgy old war vets, they manage to create an army of good bots to wipe out the bad bots, and it's go time.

The game structure is much like what you might find in a Command and Conquer-type framework, only simplified, cartoonized, stylus-driven, and about 10 times more fun. Builder units convert scrap into parts to build various factories that produce various robots: heroes, medics, grunts, turrets, vehicles—you know, army stuff—to head off incoming attacks, capture waypoints (to snag more scrap), and generally carry out your orders as fast as you can tap 'em in, in league with the game's clever missions. The DS becomes your "robo-controller," with the resource screen at the top and the real-time map (which scrolls effortlessly with the stylus) on the bottom, or vice versa for particularly



complex missions.

While Robocalypse looks like a cartoon (and a really cool one at that), it plays like a serious strategy game (in fact, the preview code actually seemed a little too hard, so I'm anxious to move on to the reviewable). The ease of tapping the screen in various ways to build, defend, and attack in conjunction with guiding your strongest fighters makes Robocalypse an addicting proposition. The stylus and split screen were made for this kind of mayhem. This is one serious and seriously fun strategy game. It just also happens to be funny and looks like a cross between Rambo and robots.



preview

System: DS Developer: Konami Publisher: Konami Available: Fall 2008

Castlevania: Order of Ecclesia

As long as the money keeps rolling in, Dracula will never die.

The 2D side-scrolling platformer *Castlevania: Order of Ecclesia* is something of a first for creator Koji Igarashi. It's the first *Castlevania* title under his direction with a female protagonist. It's also a game decidedly without Dracula's persistent nemeses, the Belmonts.

The Order of Ecclesia refers to a secret brotherhood known to have defeated Dracula. Its most skilled adept is Shinoa, and she takes center stage here. Shinoa has the power to absorb powerful glyphs and use them to power her attacks.

The glyph system allows players to customize Shinoa. An individual glyph can be attached to her arms, or back and then used in attacks by pressing the Nintendo DS' X, Y, and R buttons. Players will be able to tap into dark and light glyphs, sword glyphs, etc. with approximately 100 different combinations. These combinations will influence not only her attacks, but her mobility as well. Special glyphs will allow Shinoa to form a ring with magnetic powers; she can fasten on to these and use them as a slingshot of sorts to reach platforms and the like. Caveat emptor, though: the glyphs require magic to work, so smiting monsters with button mashing is on the order of stupid. **Greg Orlando**



review

System: DS Developer: Atlus Publisher: Atlus Multi: N/A ESRB: E 10+ Avail: June 17

Etrian Odyssey 2: Heroes of Lagaard

For the last month, I've been watching Gonzo's new anime *The Tower of Druaga: the Aegis of Uruk* via the internet. We're not talking about a fansub here; Gonzo has been streaming the episodes with English subtitles each week as they air in Japan. It's a historic occasion for anime and game fans. *Aegis of Uruk* is based on a videogame from 1984 -- a notoriously difficult dungeon-crawler that can not be beaten on the first try, without a guide. *Druaga* is a game for masochists, and the anime has stirred my desire for a cut-throat RPG experience.

If Gonzo's anime marks the beginning of a trend, I have a feeling that I'll be watching an *Etrian Odyssey* anime in twenty years.

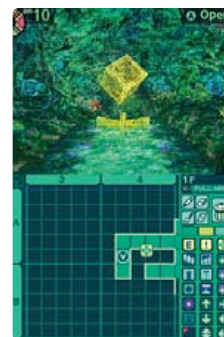
Etrian Odyssey II is a hardcore, stat-munching, dungeon mapping RPG. The big hook is that you create and annotate your own maps of the dungeons you explore. The top screen features a 3-D first-person perspective, and the bottom screen is a cartography kit. Random battles are fought *Dragon Quest* style; your top screen fills with stagnant portraits of enemies, and your party's character names blink at the bottom. There are no sweeping camera movements, or shiny summon spells -- instead, the drama comes from the play itself, and the personal gamer panic that a bad fight induces. In return for victory, *Etrian Odyssey* rewards players with more play, more options, more stats. There are twelve character classes to choose from, including my new personal favorite, Beasts.

What's a beast? Just a loyal animal. Think four roughtish adventurers ... and a bear. Hilarious.

The story of *EO2* concerns a long-lost floating castle,

high above the forests of Lagaard. Trekking up through the canopy, your specific band of warriors venture into the tree-top mazes above the village, seeking treasures and avoiding giant monsters. Each dungeon features giant, nearly unbeatable mini-bosses, called FOEs, which reward you with no experience points (and more often than not just slaughter your party). Players are encouraged to learn Foe-specific skills, to draw Foes into different corridors or trap them in place to pass by.

The game is not fun in a button-mashing way. It's like model-building, or optional homework. If you've played *Etrian Odyssey* through to completion, you know what I mean (and you lucky gamers can use a password you received at the end of the first title to unlock special features in this one). Truth be told, if you finished *Etrian Odyssey*, you're going to get this game; tweaks like more specific



map icons and auto mapping are going to soothe your complaints from the first title. The hardcore who missed out the first time are strongly encouraged to give the game a run. The satisfaction of finishing even a single map is like the bliss that comes from organizing all your books, or alphabetizing CDs. It's fun for completists. Everyone else will just stare, dumbfounded. **Heather Campbell**

parting shot

Depending on how you define fun, this game is either entirely your bag or not something you'd be interested in at all. It's a grueling dungeon quest that does not apologize for the clichés of its pedigree.

preview

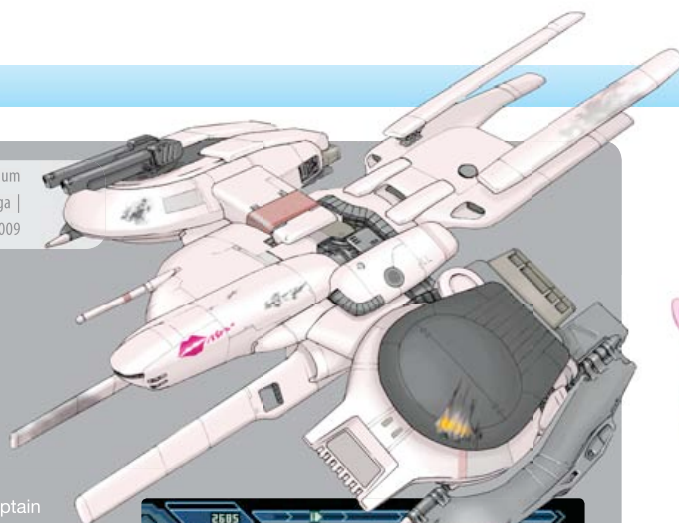
System: DS | Developer: Platinum
Games | Publisher: Sega |
Available: 2009

Infinite Line

The new power trio of Platinum Games is on the right track: science fiction themes=goodness. Infinite Line is being touted as a role-playing game in space, where you take hold of an enormous fleet of spaceships and build them to your liking, eventually becoming a big-dog captain and commanding your personalized trophies of futuristic engineering into war across the galaxy. With a blend of 2D and 3D, the game is being promoted as DS-defying pretty. Benefit of the doubt goes to these ex-Clover Studios peeps who are bringing Infinite Line to the DS.



"...the game is being touted as DS-defying pretty."



preview

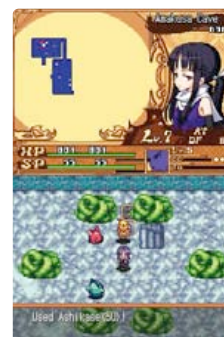
System: DS | Developer: Success / Ninja Studio |
Publisher: Atlus | Multi: 1 Player |
ESRB: Teen | Available: July 22

Izuna 2

The Unemployed Ninja Returns

I liked the original Izuna; in fact, it has been one of the three games in constant rotation in my DS as of late. Sure, it isn't the best of the "roguelike" dungeon crawlers to hit the handheld, but Izuna has a certain charm and personality to it that I can't help but get a kick out of. So it's no surprise that I'm looking forward to the game's sequel, Izuna 2: The Unemployed Ninja Returns, coming our way this July from Atlus. One of the biggest changes this time around will be the "tag team" system, where other characters can join our heroine Izuna as she explores the game's multiple dungeons and work with her to perform new Tag Attacks.

Eric L. Patterson



review

System: PSP | Dev: High Impact Games | Pub: SCE | ESRB: E | Avail: June

Secret Agent Clank

Clank may be tied down to Ratchet in more ways than he'd like, but the little tin head should know he deserved his own game a lot sooner than this. Secret Agent Clank centers its universe around the stealthier takedowns of the newly souped-up Clank, whose path away from traditional weapons combat is a welcome one for the series. Nothing much out of the ordinary beyond the gadget focus: the Ratchet and Clank aesthetic remains strong if not stale, and the platforming and puzzle bits are well designed as always. The routine Bond reference could have been replaced with a number of other themes and been no less effective, but then you wouldn't have that fun little bit of Tie-A-Rang combat—death by tie saw is always welcome. **Brady Fletcher**





preview

System: PSP | Developer: Clap Hanz |
Publisher: SCE | Multi: 1-16 |
ESRB: E | Available: June

Hot Shots Golf Open Tee 2

Fans of Hot Shots Golf are so right: nothing beats this cheerful game of fantasy-powered golf for people who might not normally play golf. That's me, and if that's you, check this series at its best—beefed up just enough from the last outing on PSP to deliver you a fine sequel. The 16-player online play is golden, awaiting your dominance after you've spent ample time exhausting the single-player modes of all the necessary extras that boost the appearance and effectiveness of your golfer of choice. There's really a ton of stuff to accomplish in Hot Shots Golf: Open Tee 2, and the mechanics of the game are rock-solid enough that the familiarity of play is perfectly acceptable for the PSP. But next time, maybe introduce a more engaging swing mechanic like Out of Bounds on PS3? **Brady Fiechter**



preview

System: DS | Dev: Tecmo | Pub: Tecmo | Multi: Online Multiplayer | ESRB: TBA | Avail: Fall 2008

Tecmo Bowl: Kickoff

When reviving classic games for modern consoles, some titles are begging to be reborn via next-gen game-play concepts and amazingly-crafted graphical engines. Then you have games like Tecmo Bowl, where most fans instead want a game that's unashamedly old-school, with a look and feel like the NES and SNES versions that made the series the cult classic that it is. That's exactly what we're in store for in Tecmo Bowl: Kickoff for the DS: tried and true 2D Tecmo Bowl goodness with just the right amount of new elements tossed in, including customizable teams and playbooks along with some thankfully included online multiplayer. **Eric L. Patterson**

"That's exactly what we're in store for in TB:K for the DS: tried and true 2D Tecmo Bowl goodness with just the right amount of new elements tossed in."

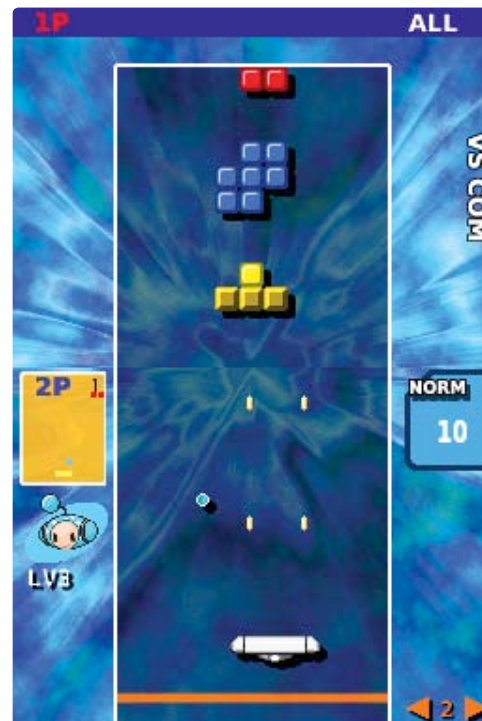
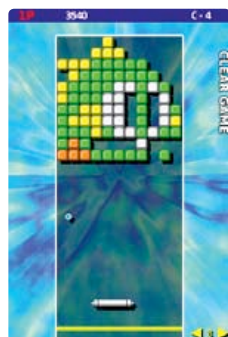


review

System: DS | Dev: Taito | Pub: Square Enix | Multi: 1-2 players online | ESRB: E | Avail: June 17

Arkanoid DS

As excited as I was over the idea of Arkanoid coming to the DS, the end result is sadly a bit disappointing. Let me be clear: Arkanoid DS will give you plenty of single- and multi-player brick-breaking fun for a mere \$20. The problem is, the game feels more like somebody's attempt to make an Arkanoid knock-off than an actual Arkanoid title, and the lack of real excitement or flair in the overall package is surprising given how much care Taito put into the recent Space Invaders Extreme. It also doesn't help that the only option us Americans have for snagging that sweet specialty paddle controller is going the import route. **Eric L. Patterson**



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System: PSP | Developer: Namco Tales Studio | Publisher: Namco Bandai | Available: Now JP

Tales of Rebirth

A lost PS2 classic gets a second chance to be ignored in the west

words Casey Loe

Last year, the pickings were so slim in the Tales series that even the farmed-out PSP spin-off Radiant Mythology got a domestic release. But this year, the Tales tree has produced a bumper crop, and some truly choice fruits are being left to rot. I can sympathize with that decision—focusing on a few event titles instead of flooding the market probably is the best way to revive the franchise in the west. But if there's room for one more game on the Tales slate, it should be Tales of Rebirth—a PSP port of the installment that many Japanese fans consider to be the apex of the series.

Tales of Rebirth was the final Tales game developed by the 2D-focused half of Namco Tales Studio. It was originally released on the PlayStation 2 in late 2004, a year after Tales of Symphonia, and at a point in which hand-drawn games were practically a lost art. Each field and town is basically a full-color painting, free of any repeated tiles. The character animations are stunning, both in battle and out, and packed with swinging ponytails and billowing shirtsleeves that seem to be there just to show off the game's budget. Anyone who enjoys the classic style of 2D RPGs like Chrono Trigger, Final Fantasy VI, and this team's own early Tales titles will be impressed to see how far the genre continued to advance after high-budget 2D RPGs stopped being released in the US.

Ironically, while Tales of Symphonia introduced 3D graphics to the series, it was Tales of Rebirth that had the true 3D battle system. It's based on the classic side-scrolling battles of earlier titles, but now has three parallel planes that you can jump between with a double-tap of the D-pad. These extra planes bring some order to

the chaos of four-on-four fights and make it possible to sneak behind foes or dodge incoming spells. The triple-planar battle system is far from Rebirth's only quirk; the 2D Tales team has always been much more experimental than their 3D counterparts, and the game is awash with strange systems that have yet to be repeated. My favorite is the force cube, which replaces the concept of MP entirely; you map four special attacks to the four corners of the cube, and press in that direction to use them. Once an attack has been used, it becomes weakened until you refill that part of the cube by using a few normal attacks. That's all there is to it—as long as you rotate your special attacks and mix them in with normal attacks, you can use them as often as you want. Not only is this more fun than trying to balance MP usage, but it eliminates any need to micromanage the AI of your allies, since they can never use too much or too little MP.

Other quirky systems include the Rush Gauge, which allows you to lower your power and boost your healing rate when fighting defensively, or go balls-out when you've got health to spare. Another allows individual weapons and armor to gain experience points which can be spent to boost their stats and unlock special properties. Tales of Rebirth probably has the best selection of systems of any game in the series, and makes me miss the days when there was more experimentation with the series' basic mechanics.

In Japan, Tales fans have split into two camps, with half considering Rebirth to be the high point of the series, and the other half favoring Abyss. While there's a lot to love about Rebirth, I remain firmly in the Abyss camp, because the 3D team is just so much better at

storytelling than the 2D team is. Rebirth's X-Men-inspired story seems promising on the surface; the death of a king with great magical powers has for some reason triggered the emergence of special powers in individuals throughout the world. Many of those characters can't control their powers, causing minor catastrophes until your team of heroes can bring them under control and into your group of anti-government rebels. The problem is that the



story is painfully overwritten, with tons of unnecessary dialogue. And when the story turns its focus on racism, it does so in such a heavy-handed way that it's completely laughable—at least until the laughter gives way to boredom.

The self-serious story is not Rebirth's only frustration. As beautiful as the 2D environments are, it can be extremely difficult to tell the traversable paths apart from the artistic flourishes. And while the PSP port is exceptional, with fast loading times and skillfully reformatted graphics, it drives me crazy that you need to use the awful analog nub to run on field areas, when the D-Pad is the better choice for the clear cardinal directions necessary to jump from plane-to-plane in battle. If Tales of Rebirth is ever localized here, they need to add a run button so the whole game can be played with the D-Pad.

The 2D Tales team hasn't made an original game since Tales of Rebirth (although they did excellent work on the PS2 Tales of Destiny remake), but they're rumored to still be around and working on an as-yet unannounced DS

Tales title. I sure hope it's true, because they bring a lot of creative energy to the basic mechanics of the series, and their games feel different enough from the 3D team's that they almost seem to be in another series entirely. In the meantime, let's hope Namco Bandai seizes this opportunity to right one of the great wrongs of PS2 RPG history by bringing Rebirth to the states.

parting shot



Of all the Tales-series games passed over for a Western release, this is easily the best. Importers can enjoy its strengths by playing through it with an online FAQ—not understanding the story won't be any big loss.



"If there's room for one more game on the Tales slate, it should be Tales of Rebirth—a PSP port of the installment that many Japanese fans consider to be the apex of the series."



Vantage Master Portable

From this vantage point, you can see ten
years ago

words Casey Loe

After viewing the tutorials explaining how Vantage Master Portable works, I figured it would manage to hold my attention for all of an hour or so. And then, eight hours later, I finally came up for air. I'm still sort of at a loss as how to that happened—Vantage Master Portable really doesn't seem to be all that good of a game, and yet, I can't seem to stop playing it.

When you first fire up Vantage Master Portable, you'll be assigned a summoner based on how you answer a series of moral-dilemma type questions. (And then, if you're me, you keep resetting and retaking the quiz until you end up with a moral profile that matches that of a reasonably hot female character.) You then select a battle from a map, and can replay that battle until you claim victory and unlock a new spell or monster type as a prize. When you clear enough battles, you get a thrilling event scene featuring art of your character discussing the game's thin-to-nonexistent story with art of another character. Then, more battles open up. That's pretty much it, unless you can unlock the game's super-secret bonus scenario, an elaborate process that consists of scrolling down to the word "SECRET" on the main menu. The secret scenario allows you to choose a hero from Falcom's excellent Sora no Kiseki series, and enjoy the same thin story, albeit with a familiar piece of art, a familiar voice, and different dialogue.

With that little in the way of window dressing, the battle system has to hold up the entire game. Each fight is a one-on-one affair in which your summoner and your opponent take turns attacking, summoning a monster, or casting a spell. Summoned monsters then get their own turns, in which they can attack or perhaps cast the single spell they know. Once you have a few monsters on your team, the game plays like a simple version of any other turn-based strategy game, with the twist being that the game only ends when one of the two summoners is killed. Since summoners have only 10 HP—the same amount every monster has—they aren't particularly hearty. Trying to slip a few quick monsters through

your opponent's defenses is just as viable of a strategy as taking control of all of the board's MP-generating resource spots and overpowering your foe's army one monster at a time.

If that sounds overly simple, you're right. The game doesn't have a ton of complexity—careful positioning of your units is crucial to ensuring that monsters can't reach your summoner, but terrain bonuses aren't much of a factor and surrounding a foe gets you nothing. The monsters have a traditional rock-paper-scissors hierarchy (water > fire > heaven > earth > water), that makes for a few interesting choices—you can trump your foe if you focus on reacting to their summoning decisions, but that will leave you playing defense in a game that can often be won with a quick and aggressive offense.

Vantage Master's secret is that instead of trying to add scale and complexity to the standard SRPG formula, it instead reduces it to the level of a board game. In the way that chess is often at its most fascinating when there are only a handful of pieces on the board, every decision you make in Vantage Master is significant—choosing to move your monster to the hex southwest of an enemy monster instead of the hex due west of that monster could easily cost you the entire game. Some battles are won in five minutes, and the long ones top out at around 30, making Vantage Master well suited for commutes and dentists' waiting rooms. I imagine that it would also be an exceptionally fun multiplayer game, although since it offers only ad-hoc support, importers probably won't have anyone to play it against.

If Vantage Master Portable sounds like another uninspired copy of the traditional turn-based strategy formula, think again—it's actually a direct port of a 10-year old PC game that was itself a likely inspiration for many of the last decade's great strategy titles. (Grimoire, for example, is basically just a real-time version of Vantage Master.) The problem is, Falcom has long ago released the original game as PC freeware (there's even a version in English), and Vantage Master Portable doesn't offer a lot of enhancements over that original release. The

new art is good, the arranged soundtrack is great, and the ability to play as Sora no Kiseki characters is a fun bonus for fans of that series, but... That's about it.

Still, it's amazing that Vantage Master holds up as well as it does, 10 years after the game was designed. While the game can no longer offer anything that feels new to those who follow the SRPG genre, its minimalist approach has an addictive appeal that can compete with the best of its successors. This would be a fine title to get a Sony pick-up and a Patapon-style \$20 retail release. If that doesn't happen, it at least stands as a worthy import, as the game is so simple that its Japanese-language menus could be easily figured out with only a few minutes of trial and error.

parting shot

On paper, Vantage Master Portable seems like a relic that couldn't possible hold its own against more modern SRPGs. But surprisingly, it's that old-school simplicity makes it so satisfying and addictive. For a port of a freeware game, it's overpriced at 4800 yen, but new frills like a great arranged soundtrack help to soften the blow.



"Vantage Master's secret is that instead of trying to add scale and complexity to the standard SRPG formula, it instead reduces it to the level of a board game.



Tatsunoko vs. Capcom:

Cross Generation of Heroes

In Japan, it's every bit as awesome as Marvel Vs. Capcom. No, seriously!

words Dai Kohama

A record number of new fighting games were unveiled at the 2008 AOU show held in February, with the largest push coming from the fighting-game pioneers at Capcom. The highlight of their booth was obviously Street Fighter IV, but their slate was filled out nicely with Sengoku Basara X and Fate/Unlimited Codes as well. No one would have imagined that they had yet another arcade fighting game in the works for a 2008 release.

But on May 23rd, their secret was revealed: Tatsunoko vs. Capcom, Cross Generation of Heroes. As the title suggest, the first Capcom-development installment of the "Vs." series in seven years will pit the usual Capcom cast against the characters of anime studio Tatsunoko Productions. If that doesn't mean anything to you, you probably grew up in the western hemisphere, where Tatsunoko Pro is best known (and arguably only known) as the makers of Speed Racer. But you'd be hard-pressed to find any Japanese who came of age in the 70's and isn't conversant about Gatchaman and Time Bokan, or who wasn't touched by Casshan and Tekkaman: The Space Knight at an impressionable age. Sadly, most of these

"Like Street Fighter IV, Tatsunoko vs. Capcom uses 3D modeled characters but plays out entirely in 2D..."

series were licensed to tiny companies in the U.S., and were only ever made available on VHS tapes, if they were released at all. (Tatsunoko's early 90's Samurai Pizza Cats series won something of a cult following in the states, but it isn't clear if the cast of Tatsunoko vs. Capcom will go beyond the golden-age heroes of the 70's and early 80's.)

So far, the two revealed characters on the Tatsunoko side are Casshan (or "Casshern," if you prefer the Japanese romanization), and Ken "the Eagle" Washio, from Gatchaman. (Fun bit of trivia: The latter character was designed by a young Yoshitaka Amano, who would later gain international fame for his work on the Final Fantasy series). On the Capcom side, the only revealed characters are Ryu and Chun-Li.

Like Street Fighter IV, Tatsunoko vs. Capcom uses both 3D modeled characters and 3D backgrounds, but plays out entirely in 2D. The battles are 2-on-2 tag team matches in which you can pair any two characters you like, and switch between them freely in battle. Capcom has indicated that the systems that appeared in previous Vs. series titles will return, including tag attacks, assist attacks and counters. And as in previous installments, flashy Aerial Rave and Hyper Combos will also be possible. The developers have also promised a variety of new systems that have yet to be unveiled.

The game is scheduled to hit Japanese arcades sometime this year, and while there haven't been any official announcements, a port to the PS3 is virtually certain to follow. A U.S. release, however, is somewhere between unlikely and flat-out impossible, as untangling



the licensing issues surrounding Tatsunoko's characters would surely be more trouble than it's worth, especially considering that none of the characters are particularly popular here in the first place. That should all but guarantee that Tatsunoko vs. Capcom joins Osu! Tatakae! Ouendan! and Jump Superstars on the list of best-selling import games of all time.



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preview

System: PC, Mac, Linux **Developer:** Ankama Games **Publisher:** Ankama Games **Multi:** Persistent online **Available:** Sept



Wakfu

Lost and found in an ocean of tears

words Mike Griffin

A hugely powerful and immensely irritable ogre called Ogrest managed to do the impossible and gather the six magic dragon eggs, the Dofus. In the World of Twelve, this was never meant to happen. He did it all for his woman. Unfortunately for Ogrest, she was after the eggs, not his love—and he realized it. As if he wasn't snapped to begin with, the power of the eggs drove the massive brute mad. He challenged any heroes to come for the eggs; he challenged the gods. The world's legends speak of the heavens erupting in war, the rage of a heart-broken titan, and an unspeakable flood.

Life returns 1000 years later in Wakfu, Ankama Games' upcoming tactical MMORPG. Beneath the guise of a painstakingly hand drawn isometric world is a deep, customizable online RPG experience with classic turn-based tactical battles and unexpectedly sophisticated ecological and social systems. We spoke to Wakfu's lead designer Reynald François and amassed further details.

"...there's the Wakfu itself: the subtle balance between destruction and creation, godly and earthly powers, life and death."

Reynald François, Lead Designer, Ankama Games.



Interview

Reynald François Lead Designer, Ankama Games



"The world of Wakfu will welcome up to 25,000 concurrent players per server..."

Reynald François, Lead Designer, Ankama Games.

play: What sort of day-to-day activities will players engage in when they log into Wakfu's online world?

Reynald François: Our idea here is all about involvement. Players will be able to choose from simply going out to adventure, to getting involved in the many dedicated activities in the world of Wakfu. Maybe fighting for ecological preservation sounds good? Or destruction; it's not for us to decide. Or how about getting involved in the game's deep political system—maybe you want to be governor, huh? Time to start climbing the social ladder and earning votes. And we'll have fun quests aplenty that we call Challenges, allowing you to follow a highly designed meta-plot, do everyday tasks that change the appearance of the world, or whatever quests comes your way.

How do you encourage players to take part in the campaign, to explore and advance their characters in the story? Will players unlock new areas?

Well, for one thing, there's the Wakfu itself: the subtle balance between destruction and creation, godly and

earthly powers, life and death. Every action a player takes will contribute to shifting the balance toward one side or the other, so there's always this to be aware of. Judging Wakfu's status at any moment, the team is able to get the meta-plot moving, going from one great piece of the storyline to another, and reacting to whatever the players do. Players will be able to virtually burn forests down, or decimate whole populations of mobs. Depending on their actions, they will be able to unlock—and re-lock—dungeons or entire areas of gameplay. The players will directly reap the benefits of getting involved in the main storyline with such unlocks, but we won't coerce them into doing so.

You mentioned dungeons. Is Wakfu going to be mainly open overworld areas?

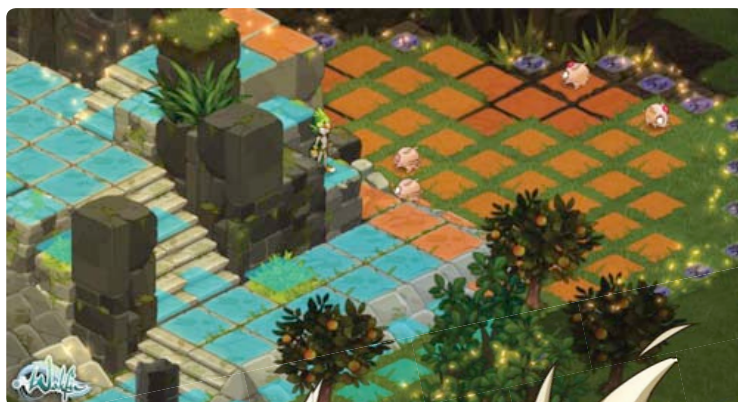
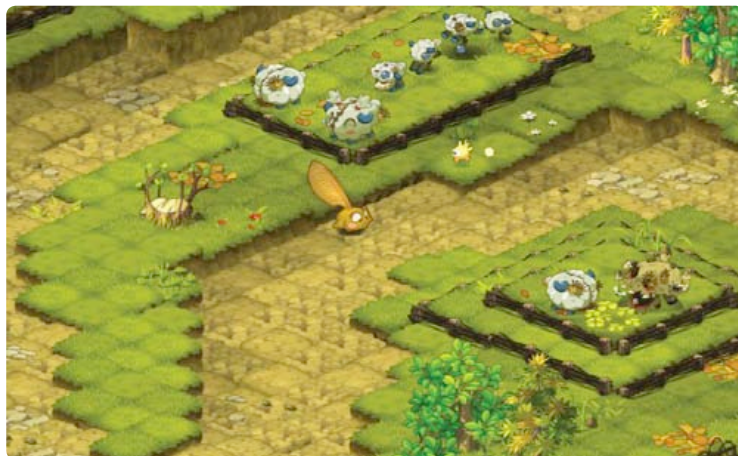
Yes, the world's going to be mainly open, with broad, wide areas playable, but we've got in stock more than a few dungeons, with precise, hand-crafted gameplay to offer real traditional tactical challenges scaled to the player's expectations.

AI for a persistent world

Wildlife in Wakfu travels in families, migrating according to hunting, vegetation and weather (doing away with the idea of static spawn fields). If both males and females are present, they'll mate, reproduce and pop out baby creatures. Adults that successfully harass players and defend their families will evolve into Chiefs, whose superior genes may produce special offspring. Creatures give orders to each other in battle to outwit players, and the higher their position, the better their chances of being obeyed by peons of lower rank.

Tactical progression

Wakfu's combat embraces classic turn-based rules and conventions, such as movement squares, line of sight, height and initiative. Certain player classes, like the time-manipulating Xelor, will gain initiative advantages in Wakfu's battle timeline, while flanking bonuses naturally come to stealthy units like Srams. You'll be leveling up vast tiers of abilities and spells here, not merely character levels, and every use improves a spell's relative power and associated stats.



What kind of reward mechanisms do you try to emphasize in Wakfu's various strategic RPG systems?

We want it to be tactical, but also keep a nervous gaming pace. It's not always the easiest part actually; tactical gameplay is, by design, prone to induce small waiting times to allow for planning your actions. So we choose to monitor a lot of things, like character orientation, timing, and environment—which is taken into account when we create the dynamic fighting area, called the Bubble, which changes in shape and properties depending on who you fight and where you fight. Fast players will get instant action rewards, given that they sacrifice proper preparation in exchange for speed. We also choose to favor instant XP-as-you-cast, meaning that what you do is what your character will be the best at doing. This means instant rewards, because when you gain enough XP to level up, you just level up in that skill you've been using right away, benefiting from the added value on the fly.

These are inspired character designs and painstakingly animated attacks. We know it's coming to DS, but that's a different game set in the Wakfu world. How similar is the console version?

Wakfu is going to be complementary on all platforms. The game will be slightly different on each platform; compared to the tactical RPG computer editions, the console version will be more action based, but at this point of development we can't give too much information.

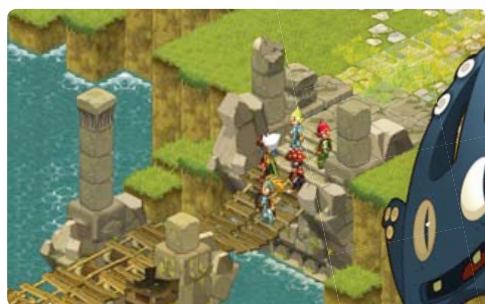
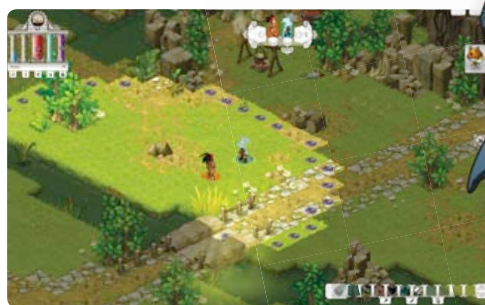
You have some rather unique non-combat world interaction, like seeding and harvesting, that allow players to interact with the ecology. What factors affect growth?

The overall ecology will be very important and rewarding in Wakfu. Plants will die if left without water or if constantly harvested. Players will have to re-seed, plant trees, maintain a balance. Soil quality is important. The game's dynamic weather will also be a very important element of this gameplay.

You look at Wakfu's style, the traditional turn-based battles... you don't expect this kind of depth, like forestry systems and migrating creatures. You also have some very interesting social systems. Wakfu is attempting a sophisticated socio-political model of self-governing...

We're going to make Wakfu a unique MMORPG for various reasons. First of all, it will have no typical NPCs running the show. The game will revolve around players and their actions, and give them entire freedom and control over their world. The game will indeed have a complex political system where elected players will act as governors on the different islands, and will have to decide for the future of their islands, and seek the well being of their citizens. The world of Wakfu will welcome up to 25,000 concurrent players per server, so the honor of leadership will be well-earned and much scrutinized.

That sort of puts the "RP" in MMORPG, eh? Thanks very much for the conversation Reynald. We look forward to hearing about Ankama's North American plans for Wakfu leading up to its late 2008 release on PC, Mac and Linux. In the meantime, a summer beta is in the cards, and the Wakfu anime and manga are in production.



Osamodas are expert tamers of summoned creatures. They use their little terrors to capture an enemy's soul.

preview

System: Xbox 360, PC

Developer: Twisted Pixel Games

Publisher: Twisted Pixel Games

Available: Sept

The Maw

Put your money where your Maw is

words Mike Griffin

Back at home, who knows how many millions of miles away, Frank was a pilot. A really good one too. Oh sure, his people aren't as advanced as the Kromdarians, what with all their potent technology and galaxy-protecting authority, but Frank comes from a peaceful folk who abide by Kromdar law. All of which has Frank wondering why the Galactic Bounty Hunters have picked him up for detainment on this ship. And is that imprisoned creature over there a Maw? Nah, it couldn't be. Moments later the Kromdar ship is struck, crash landing on a verdant alien world. This is the part where Twisted Pixel Games introduces Frank to The Maw, one of the most dangerous creatures in the universe and a forthcoming Xbox Live Arcade and PC game.

"Frank realizes Maw is possibly unsafe, but decides to use his abilities to help him get off the planet and return home," Twisted Pixel CCO and Director Josh Bear tells *play*. "At the beginning of the game it's unclear where Maw is from, or if he's the only one of his kind. Maw has nothing on his mind other than eating. He's indestructible, although players will see that he can be a big wimp when it comes to certain creatures or objects. The GBH soldiers had contained him, but once the ship crashes, he gets loose."

And for some reason, explained later in the game, Maw only responds to Frank's commands. When the soldiers see that the Maw is free and they can't get to their leash gauntlets, they escape aboard a rescue ship, leaving Frank and Maw to explore the vast, unknown world together. "We wanted to open up the



"Frank realizes Maw is possibly unsafe, but decides to use his abilities to help him get off the planet and return home."

Josh Bear, CCO and Director of Twisted Pixel Games.

environments and show a big, bright, colorful world," Josh explains. "This was more accommodating to Maw's growth, since he grows larger—sometimes *much* larger—as he eats creatures throughout the game. Also, in a slightly twisted way, Maw is the darkness in this game; players have access to possibly the most deadly creature in the galaxy. The bright, open environments let us show off the humor of Maw eating and destroying the world with his powers."

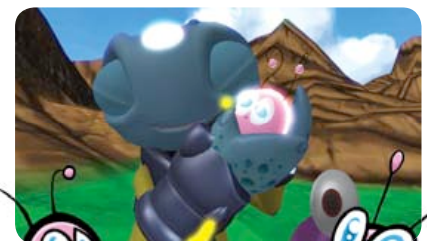
Each new area in *The Maw* features a new power creature—escapees from the bounty hunter shipwreck. A Maw can eat a lot of different things in the cosmos, and this planet has a steady supply of the Maw's favorite new food: Yums (see sidebar). Using Frank's leash gauntlet to guide Maw, move objects, twirl and slam critters, you'll travel the world eating Yums, solving puzzles, engaging in minor platforming, and seeking the next Maw transformation. "We wanted to make sure



Frank slams a lava beast into the river using his authentic—and, ahem, borrowed—Galactic Bounty Hunter leash gauntlet. Once cooled by the river, the lava beast can be gobbled-up by your Maw to absorb its fiery powers.



The Maw can assimilate several strange powers.



"We think players will be blown away that a downloadable original with this much content is available for such a great deal."

Josh Bear, CCO and Director of Twisted Pixel Games.



each area had its own unique creature to figure out, so Frank and Maw could focus on a new power every time and players wouldn't have to worry about using old powers to get new ones," Twisted Pixel's Director told **play**. "But there's definitely a chance that powers may be available more than once, and players can experience them differently once Maw has grown to a larger size."

For *The Maw*, Twisted Pixel really wanted to focus on a strong single-player game, which they felt a lot of downloadable titles weren't offering. The team comes from a big budget retail background, and they founded the company on the principle of pushing downloadable software forward, proving it can have a scope that is much larger than expected. "Our goal is making games that fit the most amount of content into as little space as possible in order to really communicate the game via the characters' animations. We use Granny 3D from RAD Game Tools to compress our meshes and animations, as well as other data. This enables us to cram way more characters and animations than we imagined into an XBLA game. Currently the game contains around 700 animations, more than other XBLA games can claim, and there are more being added every day."

Although he couldn't discuss the game's price, Josh firmly believes that players will be getting one of the best deals on XBLA for their money. "We think players will be blown away that a downloadable original with this much content is available for such a great deal. We have a title packed with great characters and levels, a fun story, a lot of cool Maw powers and around six or so hours of gameplay. We think *The Maw* is as strong as a lot of retail games and fills a gap that XBLA has been missing for awhile."

Frank's piloting skills may be called upon before the adventure ends, and you'll be left with a good sense of where the story could go, either with additional DLC for the original game or a stand alone sequel. "Since Maw is indestructible and just keeps growing, there are a lot of awesome directions the next game could take," Josh considers. "But this game completes Frank's story for now, so players won't feel like they're left with a cliff-hanger ending."



The flying Bulbous is another creature Maw can gain powers from. The Bulbous flies around and charges plants and other objects with electricity from its core. Then it brings these electrified objects to Queen Bulbous so she may feed. If Maw can manage to eat the Queen, he gains an electric power that lets him zap creatures. Frank can use these charged creatures as weapons to take out stuff like soldier artillery.

The music of *The Maw*

Interview

Winifred Phillips Composer

play: What was it about *The Maw's* design that inspired this decidedly funky, jazzy and playful sound?

Winifred Phillips: The first I saw of *The Maw* was an early walkthrough, which showed Maw and his best friend Frank wandering around an idyllic landscape. Right away I fell in love with the way Maw moves. He's got one squishy purple—I suppose you'd have to call it—foot... and he sort of slides around on it like a snail. But he's got this great groovy bounce to his movement. So there he was, a squashy translucent globular *thing* with one big eyeball and a huge floppy tongue and enormous mouth, and he's charging all over the level with this quick, happy bounce. To me, everything about him just *screamed* jazz. He was already grooving to his own inner swing rhythm, I just had to wrap my music around what was already there. My producer, Winnie Waldron, also suggested the use of walking bass to accentuate Maw's bouncy gait, which I think worked very well.



"The central premise of *The Maw* is pure science fiction and the environment of the game is lush and natural, so the sounds needed to follow...."

Winifred Phillips, composer



Interview

Jonathan Blow

Lead Designer, Braid



play: What games did you play as a kid? I mean the ones you played a lot, the stuff that stayed with you and possibly influenced who you are as a designer.

Jonathan Blow: I played a lot of arcade games and Atari 2600 games when I was very young, but I wouldn't say that many of those strongly influenced me as individual games. Maybe the 2600 game Adventure. Bigger gaming influences came later, as a teenager, playing the Ultima games on the Commodore 64, the Infocom text adventures—notably Brian Moriarty's game Trinity, which is referenced glancingly at the end of Braid, and games like M.U.L.E. and Seven Cities of Gold. And a lot of the games that Electronic Arts made back when they were a company oriented toward making original, creative games: like Adventure Construction Set, Mail Order Monsters, Archon, that kind of thing.

Actually, early in development Braid had an entire retro remake of Mountain King built in—with revised and, I thought, better game mechanics. I was going to build a different retro game accessible from each world, played within the various rules of time, which would therefore modify the game mechanics. But I ended up not going that way, and cut out Mountain King.

Braid's time-bending mechanics; when you get an idea like this are you seeing it in raw gameplay terms, or is it something you're building out from the story?

There has to be a reason for the gameplay mechanics. It's hard for me to mentally formulate what I'm interested in, but part of it is the patterns of conscious interactions that go on in the player's head. Gameplay mechanics are interesting in that they provide a way to influence that



Braid

The princess is in another castle

words Mike Griffin

Respected artist, speaker and indie developer Jonathan Blow believes in the transformative power of games, a medium of story and interaction that can tap into areas of the mind no other form of art or entertainment can. He thinks that people generally don't put enough stock into how much gaming can affect mental health, for better or worse. He wants to make it better. Jon's forthcoming platformer Braid is an amalgamation of precise 2D gameplay and powerful themes of love, detachment and mastering time to learn from one's mistakes. Caressed by beautiful hand drawn artwork and multi-layer backgrounds, Braid has seen significant polish since its 2006 IGF design award, as it prepares for a proper release on Xbox Live Arcade and PC. We spoke to Jon about what makes Braid tick.

"I wanted the time-related gameplay for each world to deal with actual conundrums of space and time, things that we as humanity don't really understand yet."

Jonathan Blow, lead designer, Braid

Regarding the bright, optimistic backgrounds you'll encounter in the first part of Braid, artist David Hellman explains: "It gently introduces the fundamental player actions, like jumping and climbing. Most importantly, the featured time behavior is rewind, the ability to take back a mistake and try again without penalty. It's a very forgiving world. The art had to add to that sense of forgiveness and positivity."

"Story by itself is not a good enough reason for me to make a game. If I want to tell a story, I will write a novel..."

Jonathan Blow, lead designer, Braid

flow of consciousness and give it certain flavors...story by itself is not a good enough reason for me to make a game. If I want to tell a story, I will write a novel or a novella or a play or something. In Braid, though, it was the conjunction of story with gameplay that interested me—something that you can't have unless it is a game.

The main character Tim has to contend with different time-based puzzles in each new world he visits while searching for his princess. Where did the idea for these increasingly complex time rules come from?

The original idea was to have a series of worlds where time behaved differently in each world, presented in a form similar to Italo Calvino's book *Invisible Cities*—or Alan Lightman's homage to that, *Einstein's Dreams*, where there's a series of vignettes, each of which examines a different, mutually-conflicting aspect of some central theme. I wanted the time-related gameplay for each world to deal with actual conundrums of space and time, things that we as humanity don't really understand yet, rather than just being arbitrary game rules about time and manipulation. I think some players feel that aspect of the game—that there's a reason why things are the way they are, they weren't picked just because.

Some of the solutions really blow my mind, especially from World 4 and onward. Did you always want to have rewind in a world, irrespective of the particular time rules in a world?

Rewinding was the first idea that gelled, since it permitted thinking about the real world and the nature of time, and also permitted things to be said about platformer game design. What happens to reflex-oriented jumping puzzles when you can't die? Why is the Leap of Faith traditionally such a bad thing?" etcetera. Rewinding turned out to be fertile-enough ground that the rest of the game could be based on variants of it.

There's almost this butterfly effect, where you can take Tim back in time and return to the present with an item, although this might not be the same present, but rather another version of it. Did you want to mess with any future time-travel ideas?

Other ideas I'd had, seeing the future, time being bidirectional such that there is no difference between past and future—didn't produce good enough gameplay to keep. Though one idea became a hybrid: the main way of understanding Special Relativity is to view the universe as a four-dimensional place, where time is not that different from the spatial dimensions, and the Lorentz Contraction is something about motion through these dimensions not being independent. I don't know enough physics to think about this particularly clearly, but I started thinking about space and time dimensions being non-orthogonal, or even parallel, and that led to the World 4 idea of time being tied to space, which, as it happened, integrated into the rewind idea just fine.

Would it have been too difficult to get these ideas across in a 3D platformer?

The reason I wanted to explore these ideas about time and physics in a Super Mario Bros.-style world is because the rules of interaction are very simple and discrete. I wanted a game world where the basic rules were very simple, and that was not too susceptible to the butterfly effect; since the world's rules would be simple, they would make a clean palette for showing the

effects of the various ways of messing with time, and for helping the player understand the situation when time manipulations occur.

Braid's music works on so many levels. The melancholic strings, ambience...

The music was actually made before I started work on Braid, just by musicians making their own music. When starting Braid, I wanted music that the musicians really cared about, and that felt human and organic. In my experience, it's very hard to get that from game audio guys who offer to compose songs for you, especially on an indie budget. By going with pre-existing music, I knew I could ensure that the right kinds of feelings would happen.

It's a good time to be an indie developer with so many ways to get your game distributed. XBLA, PSN, WiiWare, Steam...downloadable games are in a pretty great place now, don't you think?

It's a nice situation right now, though I don't know how long it will last. We already see XBLA becoming unfriendlier to indie developers, and PSN just doesn't seem to be publishing very many games right now. But hopefully the situation continues to be relatively good. For me, the priority is just to make the games that I feel I need to be making. Distribution concerns come second. It'll probably take at least a couple of years to make the next game, and I have no idea what digital distribution is going to look like at that time. Hopefully it will have a place for whatever that game is!

Our thanks to Jonathan for a rousing chat and plenty of hands-on gameplay. With its memorable story, gorgeous presentation and intelligent time-based quandaries, it's already clear that Braid will be a must-buy XBLA game when it arrives later this summer.





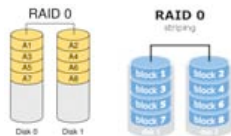
Ask Alienware

024 | 07_08

July's edition of Ask Alienware tackles hard drive configurations, extended laptop battery life, the combined efforts of onboard and discrete GPUs, and exciting emerging technologies coming to wireless internet devices and high-definition connections.

q. When building multiple drives into a new computer, let's say I want hard drives that are 100% devoted to storage... is it better to have two large drives, or span across both so that Windows sees them as a single, massive drive? I'm not running games or apps off the storage drives, so I'm not too picky about performance.
Eric, MN.

Alienware: By striping two drives together in RAID 0, you will gain the benefits of having a massive amount of storage and also the perks of better read and write speeds to the hard drives. RAID 0 definitely performs better and speeds up data transfer faster than one would experience with two stand alone hard drives. If you opt for two stand alone drives, be sure to have Windows installed on a primary, faster drive (like a 7200 RPM) so all your applications are running nice and brisk.



q. Is it worth shelling out for a router that uses the new 802.11n standard? Is it really that much better? What if I still have A, B and G wireless accessories—will they be compatible with the N router?
Ben, NV.



Alienware: Yes, it is worth pursuing the new N standard, as it is significantly faster than all previous wireless standards, A, B or G, and yes, it will be compatible with your older wireless accessories. However, it's worth noting that the N device will throttle down to the maximum speeds of wireless devices that use the other

802.11 standards. So if you're thinking about upgrading to an N network, it may be wise to upgrade all of your wireless components or accessories to N as well, in order to get the full benefits of the speed it provides.

q. I'm always hearing about these new über batteries being conceived for electric vehicles and aircraft. Makes me wonder about mobile computers. What sort of new battery technology are you testing for future Alienware notebooks? It would be incredible to have one with 20-30 hours of battery life!
Brent, NY.

Alienware: Right now the standard is Lithium Ion, and the industry is attempting to put as many cells into the batteries as possible.



While you can find larger sizes, primarily now we see them in 6, 9 and 12 cell flavors. There are newer notebooks, such as the Alienware Area-51 m15x, that allow two batteries in the system at once, so you can get some truly impressive battery life. As for new notebook battery technologies that allow 20 to 30 hours on a single charge, they are still being conceptualized. We're sure one day that will be a reality. The best thing for constant power of this duration is to leave that AC adapter plugged-in.

q. I'm confused about these new motherboards with energy-saving video throttling features. How does the PC know when to use the on-board video and when to use the dedicated video card? Let's say a game with intense high detail graphics like Crysis or Age of Conan; can you have the PC use the on-board video and the discrete video card simultaneously?
Mark, ON.

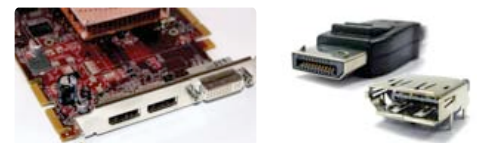
Alienware: Today's motherboards do feature improved capacity for controlling both integrated graphics and discrete graphics. A device's integrated graphics will be used for power saving, like when you're trying to get more battery life out of your



“...integrated graphics will be used for power saving, like when you're trying to get more battery life out of your notebook.”

notebook while running regular apps. Discrete graphics will be used for very intense apps like 3D games. Some systems, like the Area-51 m15x, allow the user to switch between integrated and discrete graphics. Today it's not possible to use both the integrated and discrete graphics simultaneously. Besides, the discrete cards are tailor made to run those intense 3D games, while the integrated GPU isn't built to provide a significant percentage of improvement.

q. What's the difference between VGA and DVI in terms of visual quality? Suppose I'm connecting my PC to a typical LCD monitor at its native resolution, and this monitor has VGA and DVI inputs—will I see any difference between them? Also, regarding this new “DisplayPort” technology coming to PC monitors and video cards...is it better than both VGA and DVI?
Greg, CA.



Alienware: The main difference between VGA and DVI output is that VGA is an analog standard and it doesn't allow max capacity as far as bandwidth is concerned. DVI is a digital medium and allows for much higher bandwidth transfers of high-definition digital content, meaning better visual quality. Regarding DisplayPort, yes—it's superior to both VGA and DVI. Similar to HDMI, you can also pass high-def audio through a DisplayPort connection. While DisplayPort is still young, it's likely to catch on fast.



If you have a pressing hardware-related inquiry for the Alienware experts, regarding anything from motherboards and mice to bit rates and firewalls, send them along to askalienware@playmagazine.com. Each month we'll award our favorite Ask Alienware submission with a free one-year subscription, so don't be shy!

Please visit us at www.alienware.com/ask to read our Ask Alienware archives and learn about our latest products.

Unleash your Freaky Creatures

Abandon Interactive Entertainment is preparing to launch a hybrid property that hopes to satisfy toy collectors, MMO game players and mobile gamers. Freaky Creatures will enter the market in a starter pack that includes two collectable action figures and a (re-usable) flash drive containing the full massively multiplayer game client for PC, which can also be transferred and played remotely on your mobile device. Strategic combat is the focus, but it's just one component of your creatures' life.

You assemble a persistent character by drawing upon fifty body parts, twenty attack powers, and for the creature's customizable lair, four objects and an official song. Dozens of additional parts will be made available. The lair is your Freaky Creatures' training center, where you can play mini-games with them, develop social behavior, and improve their abilities for the

combat that awaits them. Gameplay between platforms is transparent, allowing you to battle online from PC to PC, or PC to mobile. The mutant brawl begins before summer's end.



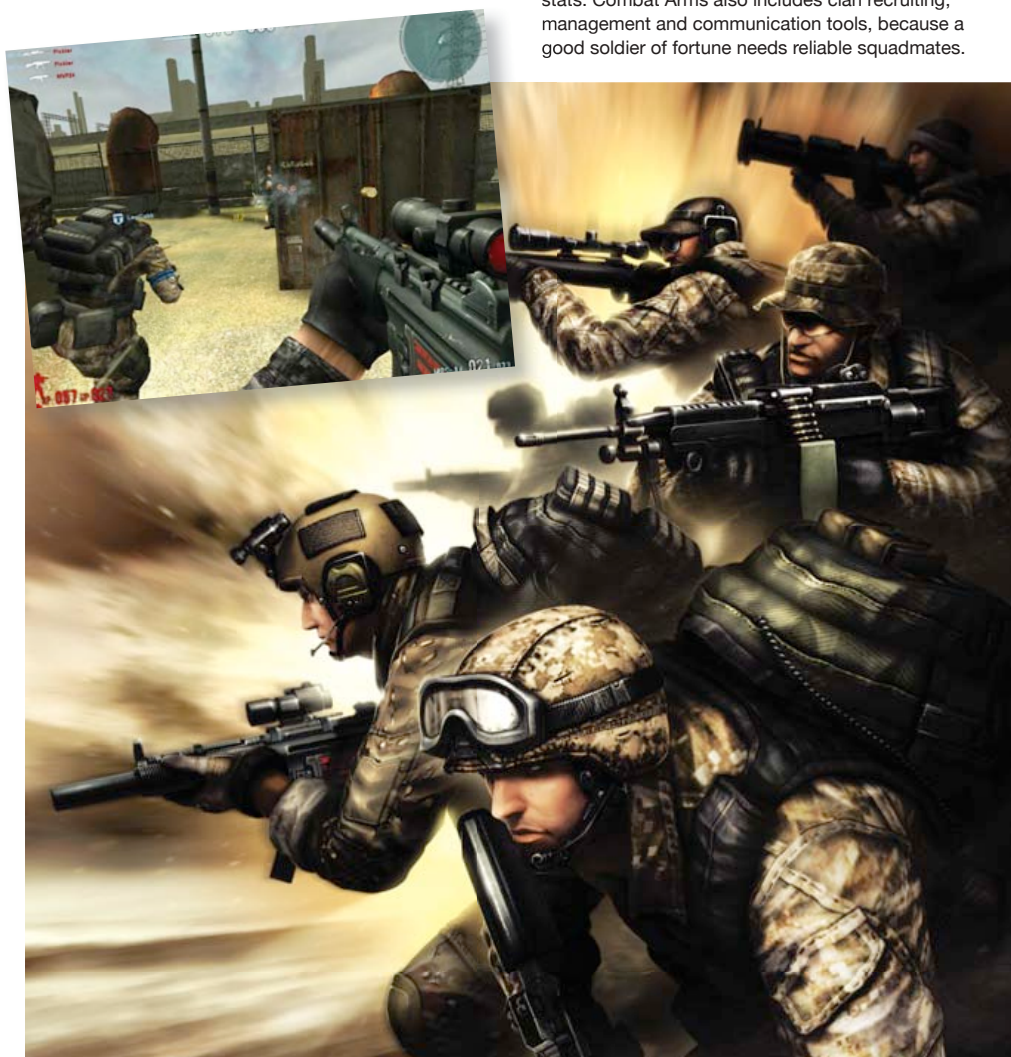
To Arms! Nexon debuts online FPS

Joining a number of recent online FPS imports, Combat Arms is now entering its US closed beta phase under the guidance of Nexon America. Combat Arms proved extremely popular in Asia, where its Counter-Strike-inspired gameplay and stylish interface struck a chord. This is a free-to-play online shooter, so you simply download the client from Nexon and start playing. Eventually an item shop may entice you, but no lack of equipment will prevent you from succeeding online.

Combat Arms splits modern warfare into three modes: One Man Army (Deathmatch), Elimination (Team Deathmatch), and Search & Destroy. OMA and Elimination feature Call of Duty-like level design suitable for 16-player encounters, while Search & Destroy may

be popular in a smaller team format such as 5-on-5. Combat Arms allows this flexibility. The game will initially launch with six maps across environs ranging from jungles and desert fortresses to industrial complexes.

Since your soldier character is saved to the server like a MMO game character, expect plenty of progressive upgrades to unlock in Combat Arms through victory and EXP. Launching with around 30 weapons, CA will also include upgradable helmets, goggles, backpacks and vests. Items can also be separately customized, like thicker magazines added to M16s and AKs, more powerful warheads for rocket launchers, and improved storage for backpacks. Nexon provides every player with a detailed profile page containing all character info and performance stats. Combat Arms also includes clan recruiting, management and communication tools, because a good soldier of fortune needs reliable squadmates.



If you aren't visiting **play** online...
then you're only getting half the **play** experience!

www.playmagazine.com

Check out **play** online, where we feed your brain daily with mass quantities of gaming, anime, and media goodness, then crank things into overdrive with our exclusive news and content straight from Japan!

We've also got loads must-have play merchandise you won't find anywhere else, back issues of play, signature series T-shirts, audio vases, the lovely ladies of Girls of Gaming in print and digital form, and even the hot new Girls of Anime.

Or just drop by the friendliest forum around and say hi, the **play** way.

The screenshot displays the play.online website layout. At the top, the 'play.online' logo is accompanied by the tagline 'the official website of play magazine'. To the right, a 'play.forums' link is shown with the slogan 'Don't just play... connect.' Below the navigation bar, a 'geek' banner features a character and the text 'Lifestyle • Tech • Movies • Music • Obsession'. A 'Subscribe Today!' offer is also present. The main content area is organized into several columns and sections:

- Navigation:** A sidebar on the left lists categories like games, media, anime, japan, link, top 5, most wanted, polls, contests, editor blogs, play forums, subscribe, subscription services, staff, about us, play partners, and contact us.
- shopdigital:** A section for purchasing digital versions of play, Rocket, Girls of Gaming, and Girls of Anime, along with other digital content.
- playdigital:** A section for digital content, including guides and publications.
- playnews:** A section for keeping up with play online via a weekly e-mail newsletter.
- playgames:** A section for game content, featuring a review of 'Burnout Paradise' and a feature on 'Console Digital Downloads in 2007'.
- playanime:** A section for anime content, featuring a review of 'We Shadows Volume 1' and a feature on 'Noise Volume 1'.
- girls of anime:** A section for anime-related content, featuring a review of 'Burnt Angel Infinity' and a feature on 'Sgt. Frog'.
- girls of gaming:** A section for gaming-related content, featuring a review of 'Burnt Angel Infinity' and a feature on 'Sgt. Frog'.
- playjapan:** A section for Japanese gaming content, featuring a review of 'Japan Loves IM@S' and a feature on 'Star Trek Trailer Hits Web'.
- playmedia:** A section for media content, featuring a review of 'Japan Loves IM@S' and a feature on 'Star Trek Trailer Hits Web'.
- playpolls:** A section for polls, featuring a poll about the best part of current gen consoles.

The website also includes various promotional banners and links to other content, such as 'girls of anime' and 'girls of gaming'.

Blood+

Collection 1

If it bleeds, she can kill it

words Dave Halverson

There isn't much going on in the anime kingdom these days, as what's left of the industry figures out how to cross the threshold from niche to mass market, or at least somewhere in between. Top-tier series such as *Naruto*, *Blue Dragon*, *xxxHolic*, *Death Note*, and *Blood +* are alive and very well, but for the most part, anime is in dire straits because of the poor ratio of quality shows that might appeal to a sizeable U.S. audience to the deluge of series created specifically for the 5,000 to 10,000 U.S. anime diehards with enough expendable cash to actually buy anime from a store. *Blood +* is a great example of the kind of Japanese-bred anime that the industry needs, along with U.S./Japan joint ventures like *Highlander*, *Witchblade*, and *Afro Samurai*, to heal and thrive once more.

Inspired by the stunningly animated original film *Blood: the Last Vampire*, *Blood +* revolves around Saya Otonashi, a very special girl/weapon born and bred with a blood type that's lethal to Chiropterans (pronounced "Keropterans"): huge blood-sucking creatures with super strength that can disguise themselves as humans. We first meet Saya, suffering from amnesia, as she lives a normal life with her adoptive father George (an ex-military man who lost his wife and daughter in a car crash) and her adopted brothers, Kai and Riku. Things begin to spin out of control when Saya heads back to her school at night to grab her gym shoes and finds herself face to face with a Chiropteran—it reaches out of

a tree, grabs the teacher she's speaking with and tears his head off like a pop-top. Just as the beast is about to do the same to her and her brother Kai, who's come looking for her, a mysterious stranger appears to help her, who we come to know as Haji. Slicing his hand and taking the blood into his mouth, Saya's first kiss becomes her salvation as her eyes begin to glow blood red and her inner slayer is awakened. Taking the sword from Haji's cello case, a nick on her palm sends blood flowing down the fissure of the blade, and in one hack she splits the creature into two bloody halves. As soon as the deed is done, however, she reverts back to naive high school girl, but the cat is most definitely out of the bag.

Haji (an elegant, cello-playing gentleman who also possesses otherworldly skills) turns out to be Saya's sworn protector and servant, waiting in the wings for the event that would set the wheels in motion. We soon learn that George, who loves Saya

"Saya's first kiss becomes her salvation as her eyes begin to glow blood red and her inner slayer is awakened."

like a daughter, has also known about her past all along and has been working with Red Shield, the agency in charge of stopping the group behind Delta 6-7, a serum that turns ordinary humans into artificial Chiropterans. The dreams that have haunted Saya, depicting a murderous rampage in Vietnam, weren't dreams at all. She was born in 1833—she just doesn't know it yet. Over the course of the next 600 minutes, *Blood + Collection 1* (of 2) begins the long and winding trek through the origins of Saya's life, past and present. Produced by Production I.G. (*Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex*), the overall quality of the series is beautiful, with highly elaborate backgrounds, superb detail, and quality animation throughout, highlighted by generous CGI and special attention to key battle and dramatic scenes. Horror, adventure, and drama never had it so good.

manga review

Released by: Dark Horse Manga | Story & Art: Hiroyu Oka |
Volume: 1 | Genre: Horror | Rating: 18+ | Available: June 25, 2008

Gantz

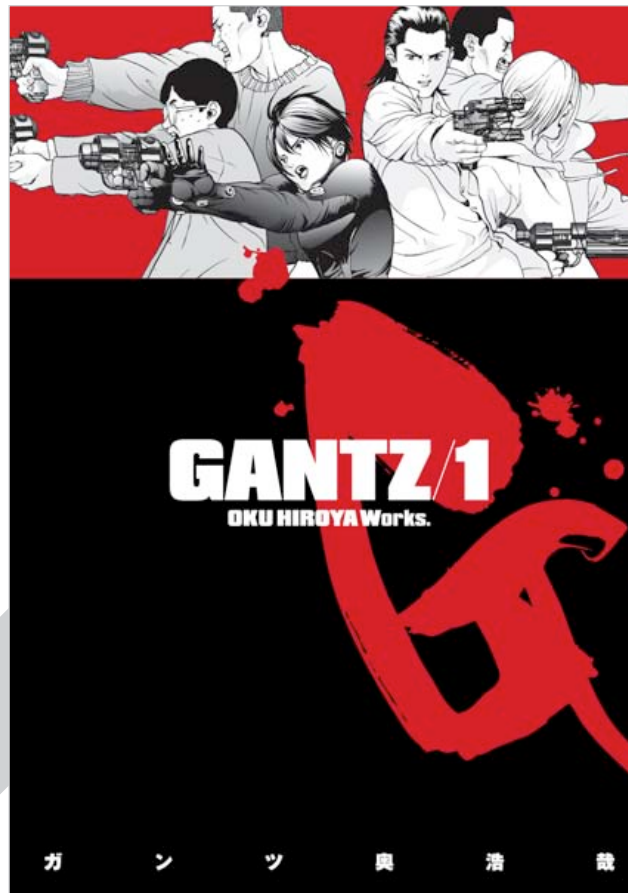
The game of life...after death

“What the...?” was my reaction about 20 pages into *Gantz*, Dark Horse’s faithful translation of Hiroyu Oka’s sprawling action manga. After all, most stories don’t begin by killing their protagonists. Especially not after he just finished saving a vagrant from a speeding subway train.

Alas, that’s the fate that befalls young Kei and his friend Masaru. The two are squelched by a train, flying apart in a shower of gore and putting the reader on watch—this is going to be an exceptionally bloody ride. Cut to a small apartment, where other people huddle around a mysterious black orb. Kei and Masaru appear on the scene, confused but alive, and strangely intact. Everyone else there, from the bespectacled salaryman to the two brutal yakuza, arrived there via similarly puzzling (and deadly) circumstances.

The sphere then rudely informs them, “Your old lives are gone. I will decide how to use your new lives.” It gives them a target, an odd-looking alien who likes onions and “friendship,” some strange guns, and skin-tight rubber suits and transports them to a new location to kill the alien. Thus Kei, Masaru, and the others must struggle to live long enough to figure out the rules of their new existence.

Not for nothing that *Gantz* is still releasing new volumes in Japan, even though it was first released in 2000—it’s an addictive blend of action, science fiction, and teenage angst, not to mention the most brutal “reality” game show ever seen. It’s also rated 18-and-up for all the right reasons: nudity, explicit gore, and some things that you just have to see for yourself. **Bill Gray**



Released by: Del Rey | Story & Art: Yuko Asada | Volume: 1 |
Genre: Adventure | Rating: 13+ | Available: June

manga review

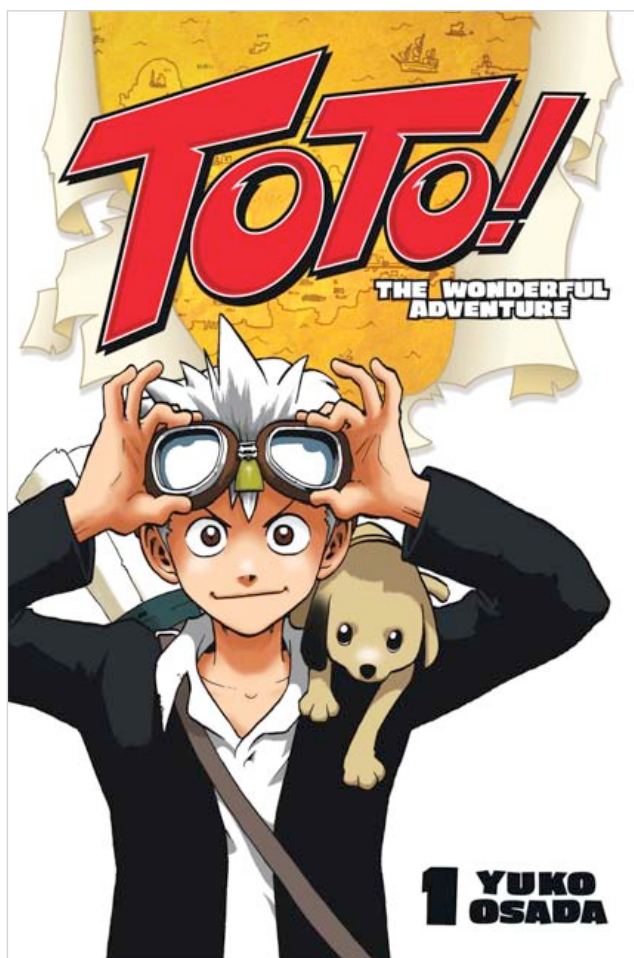
Toto! The Wonderful Adventure

See the world

Kakashi has lived on a tiny island his entire life, and although he’s only a kid, he wants nothing more than to get off of it and see the world. His latest attempt, via a bicycle-powered sailboat that he and his friends fashioned out of empty barrels and old planks, capsized the moment it hit the water. But as fate would have it, a marvelous luxury zeppelin that’s making its maiden voyage has come into view overhead, and is in need of a quick landing for minor repairs...

When Toto was very young, his father left on a journey and never came back. Some years later some men showed up and presented him with his father’s belongings, including an old journal chronicling his many adventures. The journal’s last passage read: “To my boy...I’m sorry I couldn’t be a real father to you, but let me tell you one thing: The world is vast. You don’t need a reason, so my boy...Go on an adventure.” It’s not important how Kakashi boards the zeppelin—although it’s very entertaining—what’s important is that after he befriends a puppy in the cargo hold, the airship is raided by the Man Chicken Family, a gang of bandits with a flair for high adventure and a strict family code.

Without giving too much away (because you need to find a copy, like now), what happens next is some of the best storytelling, accompanied by some of the most expressive art, that I’ve come across in an adventure manga. *Toto!* isn’t based on *The Wizard of Oz*, although it does contain many an ode to the classic journey of personal discovery, including a girl named Dorothy who names Kakashi’s extraordinary puppy Toto. More than anything, it’s based on the power of will and the gift of freedom. **Dave Halverson**



Tokyology Pop Culture Volume 1

Nothing like it on the planet

Directed by: Mack Bros. | Starring: Tokyo | Released by: Nightjar | Rated: NA

There is no city in the world quite like Tokyo, its implacable energy and scintillating style underpinning a culture that really must be felt to be understood. Even visiting the city in the flesh can prove a daunting experience if you don't know what to expect. In this documentary called *Tokyology Pop Culture Volume 1*, a fascinating cross section of the Japanese culture is explored over a number of topics, from nightlife and gamemaking to fashion and food. This isn't a history lesson, but more of a look inside the heart of contemporary Tokyo and the eccentric machine that drives this amazing city. *Tokyology* may just brush the surface, but it's always an entertaining view, especially if you are somewhat new to the unique flavor of the Japanese culture.



Funny Games

Not so funny

Directed by: Michael Haneke | Starring: Naomi Watts, Tim Roth | Released by: WIP | Rated: R

A film can be both disgusting and powerful, pointless and spot-on. *Funny Games* is a lot of things, and boring is not one of them. Don't be surprised if you walk away from this moody, psychological pummeling filled with a spirit of dread. It's perfectly valid to beg the question: does a director taking a shot at our confused love of violence lose his pulpit when such unsettling violence is his sermon? *Funny Games* is shot with a lingering, palpable morosity as it tracks a killing spree by two men moving their game of torture though the Hamptons. It dwells on a night of terrific suspense as a family of three is tortured in one slowly unfolding scene after another. I walked away from *Funny Games* questioning its motives and impressed by its icy, immensely skilled technique. A sadistic treat. **Brady Fiechter**



"Funny Games is a lot of things, and boring is not one of them."



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Discerning mouse aficionados, take heed: The Razer Boomslang Collector's Edition is limited to 10,000 units worldwide, making it not only the ultimate gaming mouse, but quite the collectible as well. The unit includes such trademarked features as an 1800dpi Razer Precision 3G infrared sensor, 1000Hz Ultrapolling/1ms response, 32KB Razer Synapse onboard memory, five independently programmable Hyperresponse buttons, 16-bit ultrawide data path, 60-120 inches per second and 15g of acceleration, Zero-acoustic Ultraslick Teflon feet, Always-On mode, and On-The-Fly Sensitivity adjustment. That's a lot of specs for a mouse. All we know is that it feels amazing in the hand—the superior quality is instantly evident—and it glides as if on air and is ultra-responsive. \$99.99 seems a small price to pay if you're serious about PC gaming (or just want your workstation to look like Neo is your roommate). razerzone.com



Time to cut the chord

Nyko Kama wireless Nunchuk

Nyko's new wireless nunchuk is a fairly self-explanatory device. A small receiver attaches to the bottom of your Wiimote, which sends a signal to the nunchuk, powered by two AAA batteries. The receiver is small and light enough that it doesn't feel awkward and the nunchuk is identical to the original, other than the Z and C buttons—which aren't quite as crisp as the stock units, although they do respond just fine. Flail at will! \$34.99, wherever game peripherals are sold.

Make the switch

Accell UltraAV HDMI 4-2 AV Switcher

HDMI switchers have become requisite hardware for anyone running multiple HDMI sources, but they are not created equal. The Accell UltraAV has all the features you need, at a price that won't ding your wallet like similar models. A built-in signal booster assures you won't come up short on the signal strength required for home theater applications, and allows you to send audio and video signals to two TVs or projectors at once. It also includes an IR extender to toggle inputs if the unit is tucked away out of the line of sight (switchers aren't the most



attractive devices), and "smart switching" automatically detects an active video source. The 4-2 supports four devices and retails for \$199.99, but we found it for as low as \$169.99 via Google.

Fake friends

WowWee Chatterbots

Plug one of these odd characters into your PC or Mac (via USB) and their unique personalities and signature animations come to life as they chime in with jokes, dialogue, and comments. You can also type in key words to trigger funny routines or use the onscreen interface to launch quips and facts on command. These bots work with email, calendar events, and instant messaging programs. Who needs people?! They also double as MP3 speakers in case you get sick of their jabber. \$49.99, wowwee.com



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BACK OF THE BOOK

07_08 HEATHER CAMPBELL
SENIOR EDITOR

NATHAN DRAKE AND THE KINGDOM OF THE CRYSTAL SKULL

“What kind of world are we living in when the knockoff product has more dignity than the source material?”

I realize that Play is primarily a video game magazine, but there's a significant portion of these pages dedicated to other kinds of media. So, I would like to take this opportunity to talk about how much I hated *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*.

This is a rant, fellows.

Indiana Jones was one of my favorite series as a child, and though the films weren't without flaw, they were generally noble, heroic, and romantic pieces that stirred the soul's sense of adventure. Remember *Raiders*? Remember the opening sequence, where Henry Jones Jr. worked his way through a terrifying, booby-trapped crypt to steal an idol? The bag of sand? The spectacular rolling boulder?

I didn't need a lot from *Indiana Jones 4*. I wanted pulpy danger; the cinematic equivalent of a 300-page paperback stolen from the dustiest section of your local used bookstore. I just wanted a little reverence, and a little adventure.

But instead, as the curtains parted and a hush fell over the crowd, the screen filled with...a CG gopher.

I almost stood up and screamed out an expletive.

Now, I understand that the *Indiana Jones* films aren't the most serious movies in history. But the earlier films didn't insult us. They didn't stick out their tongues or give us the middle finger. That gopher felt spiteful. The animal didn't drive the story forward, nor did it return as a plot point. Without a function, then, it must be seen as a character—and since they couldn't manage to find a *live* gopher, we got an animated one.

So, *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* opens on a cartoon gopher. He might as well have been wearing a top hat. Strike that. I'm surprised our cartoon gopher wasn't wearing a fedora. Maybe the next movie will star *him*.

When *Indiana Jones* wasn't insulting (CG monkeys can apparently tell the difference between Communists and freedom-loving archaeologists after swinging through a forest with a greaser), no, when the movie wasn't offending the intelligence of its audience, then it was just

treading on too familiar ground. By the end of the film, I realized I had seen the entire thing before. And no, I'm not talking about the obvious nostalgia-baiting echoes of the first films (it seems Lucas can only write stories now when they're inversions of plots he's drafted already). I'm talking about the PS3 exclusive *Uncharted: Drake's Fortune*.

What kind of world are we living in when the knockoff product has more dignity than the source material? They're essentially the same stories, but *Drake's Fortune* delivers motivated set pieces and the plot is driven by characters reacting to their environment. Simple stuff.

Contrast that with *Indy's* psychic Russian antagonist. After attempting to read Jones' mind (and failing), her paranormal abilities are never heard from again. It would be about as organic as if she'd walked up to *Indiana* and said, "You can't escape from me, Dr. Jones. I can fly." She pulls back from *Indy* and lifts her arms, seeming to hover for a second before declaring, "You're a difficult man to fly in front of."

And then we never hear from it again.

Even when there's a large chasm that separates the Russian from the archaeologist.

Uncharted and *Indiana Jones 4* both have an army of the undead (human beings altered by their contact with the strange, alien artifact), but *Uncharted's* legion of villains deliver additional jeopardy as we near the climax of the story. *Indiana's* undead warriors don't heighten the danger, don't bring our heroes to the brink of destruction. They are simply what-happens-next. They sleep in the walls for presumably hundreds of years, but can be downed with normal Russian bullets. Oh, and they're afraid of crystal skulls.

Generally, in videogames, when you find a key you can only use it once. We have a term for an object that can defeat *any* enemy or open *any* door: It's called a cheat code. *Indiana Jones'* final act is filmed in God Mode. It's lazy writing, especially when you take it in the context of the Grail diary—a character-based artifact which gave coded clues to our hero. Clues that *Indy's* father wrote, struggled over. *Indy's* motivation for defeating those final puzzles was lying on the floor, bleeding to death. Contrast the three trials of *The Last Crusade* with *Indy's* final dungeon.

Compare that breathtaking leap of faith against shoving an alien skull up against a door. Weigh *Indy's* dying dad against staring into a skull that tells you to bring it somewhere. Lazy writing, man.

Following up an elegant film about family (and we're talking pre-established relationships between father and son) with a movie about a father who has abandoned his child almost seems anti-Spielberg. *Indy* and *Mutt* don't know each other at all. You know what's stronger than a first introduction? Shared history. That's why movies don't start out with all the characters saying hello and shaking hands. "How are you doing?" (I can imagine a very avant-garde movie about mannequins or something here.) Why would you follow a movie about family with one that seems to say family is disposable, or at the very least, recyclable? *Indy* ended *The Last Crusade* with a family intact. *Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* ends with a Band-Aid.

And I'm not even going to get into the weird way that *Marion* adores *Indy* years after he left her; the fact that her son is named *Jones* when she's been married to some other guy...I mean, come on.

There are so many complaints to level at the film that I don't think I can draft them all here. I could slam *Indy 4* as a story, shriek at its misplacement in the series, come at it from the context of modern American jingo-drama. Whatever. I'm a games journalist. My disappointment is heightened by the memory of *Uncharted*—it was the last great swashbuckling adventure I enjoyed. And it was a videogame. *Uncharted* and *Indy* both have their mysterious artifacts, screaming women, ignoble betrayals, and undead warriors. But you know what *Uncharted* doesn't have? Cartoon gophers. *Uncharted* tried at every turn to engage you with its legitimacy. It said "Hey, I know this is a knockoff. But look what we can do with the formula!" *Indy*, on the other hand? He's content with slapstick jokes and tepid echoes of the better movies before him.

I'm looking forward to *Uncharted 2*. *Indy*, though? I hope he never lets *Mutt* wear his hat.

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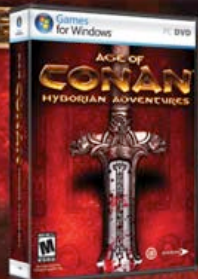


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